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REPRESENTATIONS OF IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES

by

YIN LIU ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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For my parents, with gratitude

ABSTRACT

Scholars have long recognized that identity is a crucial issue in the Middle English verse romances. Most studies of identity in the romances, however, have assumed a model of identity based on an autonomous, psychologized, individualized self separate from and opposed to an external world; the few recent studies to have posited other models for identity have tended to focus on single texts, such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In this study I explore representations of identity in a broad survey of the Middle English romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, defining identity as a position within larger ideological spaces, or "recognition systems," rather than as an extension of personality. The basic narrative pattern of these texts can then be understood as a displacement of a central character or characters from a position of identity, and the eventual recovery of that position. The three narrative structures of displacement, disguise, and recognition, while affirming the identities constructed by the recognition systems of each text, also foreground the paradoxes, tensions, and discontinuities involved in these recognition systems. Finally, the Middle English romances, foregrounding their fictionality, also imply that narrative itself is a recognition system, and that the patterns and structures of the romances are involved not only in the identities of their characters but also in the identities of their readers.

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Chapter 1

The Voice in the Chapel: Issues

> "But I'm not a serpent, I tell you!" said Alice. "I'm a-- I'm a--"
> "Well! What are you?" said the Pigeon. "I can see you're trying to invent something!"[1]

In the fourteenth-century Middle English verse romance Ywain and Gawain the knight Ywain, despairing and alone, enters a secluded chapel in the wilderness. There he is unexpectedly questioned:

> Als Sir Ywayn made his mane
> In þe chapel ay was ane
> And herd his murnyng haly all
> Thorgh a crevice of þe wall,
> And sone it said with simepel chere,
> "What ertou, þat murnes here?"
> "A man," he sayd, "sum tyme I was.
> What ertow? Tel me or I pas."
> "I am," it sayd, "þe sariest wight,
> Þat ever lifed by day or nyght."
> "Nay," he said, "by Saynt Martyne,
> Þare es na sorow mete to myne,
> Ne no wight so wil of wane.
> I was a man, now am I nane." (2103-16)[2]

This little exchange is one of a number of interrogations in Ywain and Gawain that revolve around the question "What ertow?" The impetus for Ywain's adventures comes from a story told by Colgrevance--like Ywain, a knight of Arthur's court; Colgrevance describes his meeting with a huge and hideous churl, with whom he exchanges the question "What ertow?" Later, after Ywain defeats the Knight of the Fountain, takes his place, and defeats his compatriot Kay, Arthur asks Ywain the same question: "What man ertow?" (1341). Finally, when Ywain in disguise meets his friend Gawain in single combat, Gawain, astonished by the fortitude of his anonymous adversary, pauses to ask "What man ertou?" (3655). The answer to that question is of insistent importance in the world of Ywain and Gawain; the poem is full of mysterious threatening figures inclined to fight first and ask--or answer--questions later. In Ywain's case, too, the question "What ertow?" is sometimes difficult to answer: first a knight of Arthur's court, he becomes the Knight of the Fountain, returns to Arthur's court, goes mad, regains his sanity, and takes on the alias "the Knight of the Lion." Evidently identity, specifically Ywain's identity, is a fundamental concern of the narrative; evidently also, as Ywain's peculiar answer in the chapel shows, identity in Ywain and Gawain is not a predetermined quantity but is more often represented as ambiguous, indeterminate, hidden, or nonexistent.

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[1] Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, in The Annotated Alice, ed. Martin Gardner, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 76.

[2] All quotations from Ywain and Gawain are from Ywain and Gawain, ed. Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, EETS 254 (London: Oxford UP, 1964).

This study explores the ways in which the Middle English romances interrogate and represent identity. These texts continually foreground matters of identity; aliases, disguises, recognitions, and misrecognitions form a significant portion of the apparatus of the romances. Indeed, a preoccupation with "identity" is often cited as a primary characteristic of the medieval romances. Lee C. Ramsey's book on the Middle English romances claims that "their subject is the search for individual identity within an already established society." Edmund Reiss suggests that "the search for identity, the attempt to find one's self, may be what romance is actually about." Franco Cardini calls the romance knight "a human type in search of an identity and self-awareness that elude him."[3] These scholars, however, while insisting on the importance of "identity" to the medieval romances, nevertheless fail to explain what they mean by "identity," other than connecting it with the terms "individual" and "self"--equally problematic terms that deserve closer scrutiny.

A venerable scholarly tradition considers emphasis on "the individual"--specifically, the privileging of the individual over the social--to be one of the defining characteristics of medieval romance. The roots of this tradition lie in the critical distinction between "Epic" and "Romance," a distinction influentially articulated by W. P. Ker in his 1896 study Epic and Romance. Epic, writes Ker, "implies some weight and solidity"; romance, on the other hand, involves "mystery and fantasy."[4] Ker's association of "romance" with "mystery and fantasy"--an association perhaps more appropriate to Keats than to Malory--has been developed by later scholars to involve a distinction between epic as concerned with social, "objective" realities and romance as concerned with individual, "subjective" experience. Thus Erich Auerbach, in Mimesis, follows a chapter on Le Chanson de Roland with a chapter on the chivalric romance Yvain by Chrétien de Troyes, arguing that the "historical-political element" of the Old French epic

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[3] Lee C. Ramsey, Chivalric Romances (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983) 3; Edmund Reiss, "Romance," The Popular Literature of Medieval England, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985) 119; Franco Cardini, "The Warrior and the Knight," The Medieval World, ed. Jacques Le Goff, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Collins, 1990) 91.

[4] W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (1896, rev. 1908; New York: Dover, 1957) 4.

"is abandoned by the courtly novel" and replaced by "a personal and absolute ideal."[5] R. W. Southern follows Ker in associating this shift in literary sensibility with "the growth of self-consciousness" and "the discovery of the individual" in twelfth-century Europe; Southern summarizes changes in political thought, social organization, the structure of the Church, theology, education, and literature in the twelfth century in the last chapter of The Making of the Middle Ages, entitling that chapter "From Epic to Romance."[6]

One extensive argument for this position is Robert W. Hanning's The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance. Hanning's book concentrates on French romance, especially on the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, and so has limited applicability to the English works; Hanning himself takes care to note the specificity of the "cultural moment" of twelfth-century French romance.[7] But his analysis is worth at least some consideration, for it articulates assumptions and categories that underlie much critical comment on subjectivity and identity in the English romances. For Hanning, "chivalric romance, as it emerged in twelfth-century courtly society, offered a literary form in which to work out the implications of individuality--implications which twelfth-century theology and philosophy were beginning to confront."[8] In another passage, which I quote at length because it raises a number of issues pertinent to this study, Hanning represents chivalric romance as

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[5] Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953) 122, 134.

[6] R. W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953). See Ker 322-23. Marc Bloch entitles one section of Feudal Society "The Growth of Self-Consciousness": see Bloch, Feudal Society, vol. 1, The Growth of Ties of Dependence, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 106-08. See also Colin Morris, The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1972), and Southern, "Medieval Humanism," Medieval Humanism and Other Studies (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970) 29-60.

[7] Robert W. Hanning, The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) 6.

> the story, nay the celebration, of the necessity of men (and women) to face the fact of their private destiny, and to attempt to attain that vision which, born within the recesses of the self, makes of life a process of dynamic self-realization. The great adventure of chivalric romance is the adventure of becoming what (and who) you think you can be, of transforming the awareness of an inner self into an actuality which impresses upon an external world the fact of personal, self-chosen destiny, and therefore of an inner-determined identity.
>
> Thus the chivalric romance urges the centrality of inner awareness on its audience as the key to happiness, and in the process effectively defines man as the product of inner vision shaping external experience. Since each person's inner experience will be different and unique, subjective, and marked by crises and turning points valid for him alone; and since in the romance plot there is no larger social or providential system giving meaning--the same meaning--to all human lives operating within it; it follows that these courtly narratives are making a strong and persuasive statement for the centrality of individual experience in our understanding of life and its meaning.[9]

Thus the romance has been defined against the epic as a narrative about the self-assertive, questing, self-sufficient hero: John Stevens claims, rather grandiosely, that medieval romances "ask the question--What is Man? What is Man Alone?--and try to give an answer."[10]

This model of medieval romance as an individual's quest for "dynamic self-realization" has long dominated scholarship on the English medieval romances. Thus A.

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[8] Hanning 3.

[9] Hanning 4-5.

[10] John Stevens, Medieval Romance (London: Hutchinson, 1973) 80.

C. Gibbs, discussing the "Romance qualities" of Homer's Odyssey in an introduction to an anthology of Middle English romances, identifies as one of those qualities the idea that "the hero is acting, comparatively speaking, as an individual hero rather than as the representative of his society"; later, quoting Auerbach's Mimesis, Gibbs claims that "The great theme of the chivalric romance is self-realization--in the best work, the adventures are not there for their own sake, but to call forth the very essence of the knight's ideal of manhood."[11] John Finlayson similarly insists on the isolation of the knight, defining "romance" as "a tale in which a knight achieves great feats of arms, almost solely for his own los et pris in a series of adventures which have no social, political, or religious motivation and little or no connection with medieval actuality."[12] Even a brief survey of recent scholarship reveals that this paradigm is still strongly influential. Andrea Hopkins, who quotes Auerbach, invokes the opposition of epic and romance, claiming that in romance "the hero is essentially solitary, and typically does not engage in combat with an enemy for the purpose of protecting his society and lord, so much as seek adventure with a view to proving himself."[13] In a recent collection of critical essays, Frans Diekstra asserts that the medieval romances "are for the greater part quests or tests in which the hero strives after self-realisation through the exercise of exemplary virtue."[14] Elsewhere in the same volume, Bart Veldhoen, again appealing to the epic/romance opposition, writes that romances exhibit "patterns of self-discovery."[15] Anne Rooney, discussing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, writes that Gawain's "confrontation with his own mortality . . . is a psychological acceptance and maturing process which involves coming to terms with his ultimate inescapable destiny" and appeals to "the realism we see in the portrayal of Gawain."[16] Ad Putter writes of "psychological depth" in the heroes of Chrétien's poems and in the hero of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, of their "need for continuous self-evaluation" and their restoration to "self-awareness."[17] And Velma Bourgeois Richmond mentions "self-knowledge" as one of the "essential experiences" of romance.[18]

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[11] A. C. Gibbs, ed., Middle English Romances (London: Arnold, 1966) 4, 8. See Auerbach 135. Significantly, while Auerbach writes of the "self-realization" of the feudal ethos, Gibbs writes of the "self-realization" of the knight.

[12] John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," Chaucer Review 15 (1980): 55.

[13] Andrea Hopkins, The Sinful Knights (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 7.

It is certainly difficult to deny that a concern with what might be called "individuality" is at some level basic to medieval romance. Paul Strohm, attempting to recover medieval definitions of Old French romans and Middle English romance, cites the Yvain of Chrétien de Troyes:

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[14] Frans Diekstra, "Narrative Mode and Interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Companion to Middle English Romance, ed. Henk Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1990) 59.

[15] Bart Veldhoen, "Psychology and the Middle English Romances," Aertsen and MacDonald 114.

[16] Anne Rooney, Hunting in Middle English Literature (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993) 192.

[17] Ad Putter, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 246. To do Putter credit, the book argues that Chrétien and the Gawain-poet were atypical of the romance tradition; in this study, however, I wish to emphasize the continuities between Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the English romance tradition of which it was also a part.

[18] Velma Bourgeois Richmond, The Legend of Guy of Warwick (New York: Garland, 1996) 6.

> Et mes sire Yvains lors s'en antre
> el vergier, après li sa rote
> voit apoié desor son cote
> .i. riche home qui se gisoit
> sor .i. drap de soie; et lisoit
> une pucele devant lui
> en .i. romans, ne sai de cui. (5365-70)[19]

Yvain and his companions enter the orchard of the castle of Pesme Avanture, where they find a rich man listening to his daughter reading "a romance about I know not whom." Here, argues Strohm, Chrétien indicates that a romance is about someone, "a narrative of the deeds of a single protagonist."[20] Romances, where titled in manuscript, are known by their principal characters; Dieter Mehl in his survey of the Middle English romances finds that poem after poem "centres around the hero" or is chiefly concerned with "the glorification of the hero."[21]

But the issue is not so much "the centrality of individual experience" in the romances as the assumptions that underlie the rhetoric of "individual experience."

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[19] Chrétien de Troyes, The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion), ed. and trans. William W. Kibler (New York: Garland, 1985): "My lord Yvain and his company enter the garden. There he sees, reclining upon his elbow upon a silken rug, a gentleman, to whom a maiden was reading from a romance about I know not whom" [Chrétien de Troyes, Arthurian Romances, trans. W. W. Comfort (London: Dent, 1914) 250].

[20] Paul Strohm, "The Origin and Meaning of Middle English Romaunce," Genre 10 (1977): 4.

[21] Dieter Mehl, The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (London: Routledge, 1968) passim. The romances that Mehl discusses in this respect are King Horn, Libeaus Desconus, Sir Degrevant, Sir Perceval, and Sir Isumbras.

Hanning represents "individual experience" as sharply distinct from, and indeed opposed to, "external experience"; the same distinction informs his opposition of "inner vision" and the inert materials of the external world that the individual's "inner awareness" shapes. The "individual," according to this view, is defined against rather than defined by the "external world." Thus Velma Bourgeois Richmond writes of the Middle English romance hero that "typically his point of view is not that of the world in which he must live; most frequently it comes from a heightened perception, a sense of value that gives the human being a dignity and significance which are denied or rejected by the world which challenges him."[22] Hanning indicates two corollaries of this concept of the individual: the first that "inner experience" is unique to each individual, and thus essentially subjective; the second that meaning is generated by rather than imposed upon this inner awareness and is therefore determined by "the individual" rather than by any configuration of "external experience."[23] The use of the word "individual" is significant in this context, for the word originally meant "indivisible"; Hanning represents the medieval subject according to the terms of liberal humanism, as "a self-identical entity defined through its difference from an externalized reality designated as society, or history, or the world"[24]--an autonomous, self-realizing, self-sufficient wholeness transcending the circumstances of history.

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[22] Velma Bourgeois Richmond, The Popularity of the Middle English Romance (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975) 17.

[23] Hanning 4-5.

These assumptions are problematic in a number of ways. First, the distinction between "epic" and "romance" is rather questionable. Ker, in claiming that Beowulf was an epic, was compelled to dismiss the three monster-fights as peripheral to the action because they were not suitably epic material. D. M. Hill has also appealed to Beowulf in arguing for a continuity rather than an opposition between epic and romance.[25] Northrop Frye subsumes epic into romance, calling romance "the epic of the creature" (as opposed to myth, "the epic of the creator") and discussing Beowulf and Dante's Commedia as romances.[26] More to the point, the Middle English romancers do not seem aware of any such distinction. Lists of romances or romance-heroes in Middle English conventionally include allusions to both the Matter of France and the Matter of Rome. Just after mentioning Arthur and Gawain, the author of Richard Coer de Lyon writes

> Off Turpyn, and of Oger Daneys;
> Off Troye men rede in ryme,
> What werre þer was in olde tyme;
> Off Ector, and off Achylles,
> What folke þey slowe in þat pres. (16-20)[27]

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[24] Lee Patterson, Negotiating the Past (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987) 24-25. For the history of the word "individual," see the entry for "individual" in Raymond Williams, Keywords, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) 161-65.

[25] D. M. Hill, "Romance as Epic," English Studies 44 (1963): 95-107.

[26] Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976) 15, and Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 37, 57.

[27] All quotations from Richard Coer de Lyon are from Der mittelenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz, ed. Karl Brunner (Vienna: Braumüller, 1913).

Gibbs may point to the Iliad as the prototype of epic and to the Odyssey as the prototype of romance, but, although several versions of the siege of Troy exist in Middle English, the medieval English romancers do not seem at all interested in the wanderings of Odysseus.

Surveying the scholarship that followed Ker's Epic and Romance, W. R. J. Barron concludes:

> No absolute distinction between epic and romance on grounds of form and theme has proved possible; judgements which contrast the thematic seriousness, solidity and realism of epic with the implied triviality and unreality of romance reflect modern prejudices or relate to the social conditions which produced them rather than to their distinctive literary characteristics.[28]

As Barron implies, the epic/romance distinction involves a value judgement that typically privileges epic over romance; when Ker contrasts the "tragic strength" of epic with the "lighter and fainter grace" of romance, he represents epic as worthy of serious study, and romance, by contrast, as frivolous.[29] Auerbach argues that the characteristic attributes of chivalric romance, as typified by Chrétien, were "a hindrance to the full apprehension of reality," a kind of tidal backwater in the great flow of the European literary consciousness toward fully psychologized naturalistic representation.[30] One anthologist apologizes for the romances' lack of "inner contradictions, ethical standards based on elements other than convention and lip service, true inner turmoil."[31] The rhetoric of "self-realization" that has surrounded so much Middle English romance scholarship may be, in part, an attempt to validate the romances by reading into them a kind of psychological and spiritual education that recovers practical value in becoming an expression of self-understanding and an assertion of (twentieth-century) individuality. Hanning's vocabulary, for example, attempts to establish that medieval romance is anything but frivolous: it is about the "necessity" of facing a fact, the attainment of a "vision"; it is "dynamic," a "great adventure"; it is concerned with "the key to happiness"; it makes "a strong and persuasive statement for the centrality of individual experience in our understanding of life and its meaning."[32]

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[28] W. R. J. Barron, English Medieval Romance (London: Longman, 1987) 58.

[29] Ker 321. Ker devotes five-sixths of Epic and Romance to Epic and only one chapter to Romance.

[30] Auerbach 138.

Whether or not Hanning's assertions can be profitably applied to French medieval romance,[33] they can be applied only with considerable difficulty to the Middle English romances. The characters of the medieval English romances are, as Sands has complained, "flat";[34] they show a remarkable lack of self-awareness, are not given to introspection, and, rather than being self-assertive, are more often passive and helpless figures, not obviously interested in vigorously impressing their personalities onto the world. Even in a poem such as Sir Perceval of Galles, in which the protagonist is forced to learn the subtleties of civilization after having been brought up in the uncivilized forest, Perceval's "inner experience" is not stressed; Frankenstein's monster, in Shelley's novel, is far more self-aware than is the young Perceval. Furthermore, the "self-realization" model of romance does no justice to the diversity of the Middle English romance corpus. Finlayson, after defining the "basic paradigm" of the romance as "The knight rides out alone to seek adventure," proceeds to exclude from the genre, as Hopkins points out, "about half the current canon": the Alliterative Morte Arthure, the Alexander poems, the Charlemagne poems, the so-called "homiletic romances" (Finlayson uses Amis and Amiloun as an example), and "romanticized folktales" such as Sir Amadace.[35] Obviously, insistence on a such a rigorous definition of the genre can be severely limiting. Less obviously, the "self-realization" model of romance tends to privilege certain texts over others, since some texts--for example, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in which, as we have seen, scholars are apt to find various shades of psychological realism--are more amenable to that definition than are the common run of Middle English romances. Any account of the relationship between an admittedly idiosyncratic text such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the literary tradition in which it positions itself rests on a choice of presuppositions: we may look on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as an model text, exemplifying a standard to which other texts aspire but which other texts finally fail to realize as completely, or we may consider the idiosyncracies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as evidence of the ways in which that text negotiates the conventions of medieval romance tradition and, perhaps, departs significantly from those conventions in some respects. If we choose the latter course, as I will, we will need to examine the "run-of-the-mill" romances to understand properly what those generic conventions are.

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[31] Donald B. Sands, ed., Middle English Verse Romances (1966; Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1986) 7.

[32] Hanning 4-5.

[33] Tony Hunt suggests, indeed, that they cannot: "To insist that the idea of self-realization after an 'identity crisis' is the constitutive element of the twelfth-century romance is admittedly attractive, but it is also to neglect considerable expanses of the texts in question." See Tony Hunt, Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion) (London: Grant, 1986) 17-18. Hunt also notes that in most French romances "there is remarkably little explicit treatment of the inner life of the hero."

[34] Sands 7.

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[35] Finlayson 55, 168-79. Hopkins, 14-20, provides a fairly detailed criticism of Finlayson's definition.

Part of the reluctance of scholars to investigate the more obscure romances, such as those of the Charlemagne cycle, perhaps stems from the idea, inherent in the epic/romance distinction, that the romances have very little to do with social realities. But the tenuousness of such a claim can be illustrated by a glance at Morton Bloomfield's attempt to distinguish between epic and romance on the basis of "motivational structure":

> The hero of the romance is then typically called, has a vocation, unlike the hero of the epic who acts because he wants fame or renown. The hero of romance fights for himself; at a lady's mysterious command; at his king's order; because he has to. The hero of the epic fights for a rational object, a tangible return.[36]

It is difficult to see how "fame or renown" is any more rational or tangible than a "king's order." In any case, social realities occur with embarrassing frequency in the Middle English romances: we might consider, for example, the propagandistic account of the Crusades in Richard Coer de Lyon, or the profound concern of Athelston with law and justice, or the anxiety over property rights displayed in Gamelyn. Discussing Emaré and the group of romances related to it, Elizabeth Archibald writes that there is "a considerable degree of realism in these stories. I do not mean that many medieval women spent years drifting around the Mediterranean in tiny boats; but the isolation and vulnerability of women, particularly when married into a foreign community or one far from home, were no doubt very real problems as well as traditional literary themes."[37] Underlying the marvels of Ywain and Gawain--the storm-inducing stone, the friendly lion, the giants with which Ywain must fight--is a story concerned most crucially with Ywain's responsibilities as Arthurian knight, as husband, as feudal lord.

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[36] Morton Bloomfield, "Episodic Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance," in his Essays and Explorations (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970) 112.

What alternatives exist, then, to the "self-realization" model of the Middle English romances? A scholarly tradition at least as old as Ker maintains that, in Jacob Burkhardt's words, medieval man "was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation--only through some general category."[38] In this scheme, the "individual" does not exist, but only monolithic hierarchies that define the categories of humanity. Lee Patterson has argued that such banishment of the Middle Ages into the abyss of pre-consciousness is a feature of Renaissance scholarship that attempts to define the Renaissance by setting it against, and privileging it over, an unexamined Other; if modern consciousness came into being with the Renaissance, then history begins with the Renaissance, and whatever came before it need not be too closely considered. Patterson finds that this school of thought, in the guise of Marxist historicism, is still strongly influential among Renaissance scholars. The main problem with this approach, Patterson points out, is that it implies "a hierarchical Middle Ages in which not only alternative modes of thought but thought per se is proscribed--an account that at one stroke wipes out not merely the complexity of medieval society but the centuries of struggle by which medieval men and women sought to remake their society."[39] Both these approaches, the humanist and the Burkhardtian, fix the medieval subject as a stable, self-evident entity--either because of its transcendence of, or its subjection to, an external world.

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[37] Elizabeth Archibald, "Women and Romance," Aertsen and MacDonald 162.

[38] Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, 2nd ed., trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, ed. L. Goldscheider (1878; London: Phaidon, 1944) 81.

Recently some have attempted to provide alternative approaches, both by attempting to place Middle English romance texts more firmly within their historical and social contexts, and by radically challenging static models of subjectivity. Stephen Knight's 1986 article, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," for example, examines ways in which various Middle English romances can be read as "central to," "peripheral to," or "critical of" feudalism.[40] David Aers in Community, Gender, and Individual Identity attempts to break down the "static dualism" of "individual" and "society": "The generation of meaning and individual experience cannot be understood apart from the social relations of a specific community, its organizations of power manifest in the prevailing arrangements of class, gender, political rule, religion, armed force, and, not infrequently, race."[41] The last chapter of Aers's book discusses Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. More recently, a 1993 anthology of scholarship on medieval English poetry includes a number of articles that situate medieval poems "amidst a number of conflicting cultural and textual milieux, not just the dominant traditions of orthodoxy," and trace the ways in which a medieval text "negotiates a range of ideological demands and generic or intertextual affiliations."[42] Finally, we may turn to H. Marshall Leicester's study of Chaucer, The Disenchanted Self, or to Carolyn Dinshaw's 1994 article on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Leicester deliberately rejects "the essentialist or so-called humanist view of the self as a substance, something permanent and fundamentally unchanging," proposing instead a view of the subject as the construction of "various forces": "unconscious desire, concealed or mystified material and social power, the structures of language, and of course consciousness itself." The distinction between "individual" and "external experience" so fundamental to Hanning's conception of individuality is here obliterated; instead of an autonomous "inner awareness" shaping the external world, Leicester's "subject" is an intersection of institutions and desires, inseparable from the forces that define it.[43] Dinshaw sees medieval subjectivity, in the romances, represented as performative; the chivalric world is "a world in which identity is constituted by the performance of acts precisely coded according to the normative configurations of gender and desire." Both these approaches envision subjectivity as unstable, as potentially and actually evading definition; Dinshaw mentions that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight "unfixes" Gawain's identity.[44]

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[39] Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," Speculum 65 (1990): 97.

[40] Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances," Medieval Literature, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) 99-122.

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[41] David Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity (London: Routledge, 1988) 3-4.

[42] Stephanie Trigg, ed., Medieval English Poetry (London: Longman, 1993) 6. See especially Jill Mann, "Price and Value in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," 119-37; Sheila Fisher, "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History and Revisionism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," 138-55; Sheila Delany, "The Romance of Kingship: Havelok the Dane," 172-85; and Lee Patterson, "The Romance of History and the Alliterative Morte Arthure," 217-49. All of these papers had been previously published. See also Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols, eds., The New Medievalism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), especially the introduction, "The New Medievalism: Tradition and Discontinuity in Medieval Culture," by Nichols, and Richard C. Trexler, ed., Persons in Groups (Birmingham, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985), especially pp. 4 and 16 of Trexler's introduction.

On the one hand, then, we have "the individual" or "the self" conceived of as autonomous, unique, coherent in time, essentially stable, subject to or subjecting a distinct external world; I have dwelt at some length upon this concept because it seems to be assumed, consciously or otherwise, by most critics who see "self-realization" or the celebration of the individual as the driving power of the Middle English romances. On the other hand we have various views of the "subject" (the difference in terminology is deliberate) as indeterminate, discontinuous, and unstable, as radically and ultimately contextualized in the interplay of historical, psychological, and ideological forces; the scholarly work that takes this approach to English medieval romance is still relatively scanty, and tends to focus on Chaucer and on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. I will approach this debate rather obliquely, investigating what I will call "identity"--which is, if nothing else, the frontier through which subjectivity enters the realm of challenge and interrogation and test. A recent article that perhaps comes close to my approach is one by John Plummer on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; in "Signifying the Self," Plummer argues that identity in that poem "is essentially a social construct. We are the 'person' (as opposed to the purely biological object) that, simultaneously, we claim to be and our contemporaries accept us as being. The arena for the negotiation of this identity is a linguistic one."[45] In the Middle English romances identity also has the advantage of being fairly easy to define in terms of narrative structures; the conventions of romance are remarkably stable. In the context of these conventions identity is, I suggest, configured by the romance protagonist's relations to, and transactions with, the institutions and structures, explicit and implicit, involved in the narrative. In spite of the consistency of romance conventions that define identity, however, identity itself, as Plummer points out, is never a given in these texts; debates over whether subjectivity is essential or constructed, whether a form of individual agency or a configuration of institutions, appear in these texts as tensions that we can explore but may not be able to resolve.

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[43] H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., The Disenchanted Self (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 14.

[44] Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Diacritics 24 (1994): 211-12.

With these issues in mind, let us return to our distressed Ywain. The chapel in which he "makes his moan" is in fact the site at which his adventures in this poem began and to which he continually returns; it is a geographical constant at which Ywain's situation is repeatedly measured. The mysterious voice is actually that of Lunet, Ywain's helper earlier in the poem, but we have not yet been informed of that fact. Again, this exchange is one of a series of similar interrogations in Ywain and Gawain, but the answers that both parties give in this passage are curiously evasive. Ywain's answer is particularly paradoxical: "I was a man, now am I nane" (2116). In what sense has he lost his manhood? What precisely is, to use Gibbs's phrase, "the knight's ideal of manhood"? Ywain, in a passage unique to the Middle English version of the poem, provides a few hints:

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[45] John Plummer, "Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Text and Matter, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1991) 195.

> Whilom I was a nobil knyght
> And a man of mekyl myght;
> I had knyghtes of my menȝe
> And of reches grete plente;
> I had a ful faire seignory,
> And al I lost for my foly.
> Mi maste sorow als sal þou here:
> I lost a lady þat was me dere. (2117-24)

We may note that Ywain's sense of himself is somehow related to his past social status--"Whilom I was a nobil knyght" (2117)--marked by his ability to command others and by his ownership of wealth and land, and also that a significant part of his lost manhood was his relationship with his "lady." We may note, finally, that Ywain's answer to "What ertou?" (2108) takes the form of a narrative, albeit a short one. "I was a man, now am I nane" (2116) stresses the change in verb tense, in states of being; it contrasts past and present, measures identity by its loss. Identity in the Middle English romances is a function of narrative; its complexities and operations come most strongly to the foreground in the three narrative motifs of displacement, disguise, and recognition.

This study is primarily concerned with the generic conventions operative in the Middle English romances rather than with the expression of those conventions in any single text--although, to be sure, the variety with which individual texts replicate, reinforce, negotiate, challenge, and rework generic conventions will become readily apparent. I use the term "genre" here to mean the tacit contract between author and audience that conditions the audience's expectations of the text.[46] Despite the bewildering variety of works designated in other Middle English texts as "romances"--including such surprising candidates as Laurence Minot's poems and the Meditations on the Life and Passions of Christ[47]--romaunce in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century was a literary category with enough generic force to impel the author of the Laud Troy Book to adapt his materials so that his poem would conform more closely to romance expectations.[48] As Finlayson points out, the fact that contemporary parodies of romance exist--the classic example being, of course, Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas"--indicates that there existed a recognized array of "stock elements" which characterized the genre and which in turn could be parodied.[49] Further hints come from texts that define themselves against the genre: for example, Cursor Mundi, the South English Legendary, and the Speculum Vitae attributed to William of Nassyngton advertise themselves as alternatives to, or replacements for, the supposedly unedifying secular romances.[50] "Middle English romance" is nevertheless a notoriously difficult category to delimit, and any attempt to inscribe boundaries around a definite number of characteristic texts is somewhat arbitrary.[51] For the purposes of this study I conceive of a romance as a narrative about an exemplary secular individual, understanding that definition as a tendency in these texts rather than as a boundary around them. Thus the edges of the genre shade off continually into other medieval literary forms: chronicle, epic, saint's life, folktale. In any case, most scholars, whatever definitions they formulate, start with the texts listed by Helaine Newstead in Volume 1 of the J. Burke Severs Manual of the Writings in Middle English; and Newstead's list, useful primarily for its inclusiveness, delimits the corpus for this study.

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[46] For this view of genre as institution, see Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," New Literary History 7 (1975-1976): 135-36, and Leicester 24.

[47] Reinald Hoops, "Der Begriff 'Romance' in der mittelenglischen und frühneuenglischen Literatur," Anglistische Forschungen 68 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1926): 34-37, cited by Finlayson 61.

[48] Paul Strohm, "Origin" 12-13; see also his article "Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinction in the Middle English Troy Narratives," Speculum 46 (1971): 348-59.

[49] Finlayson 47.

Genre presupposes certain narrative structures, styles or modes of representation, narrative techniques, and ideologies. Romance in particular is fundamentally antimimetic, strongly formulaic, and to use Pamela Gradon's term, "mythical"--that is, romance is a "way of writing in which the story is primary, and motivation is not demonstrated through analysis of individual character, but people exist for action."[52] Characters tend to be sharply polarized, "presented in black and white terms according as they oppose or forward the ideal to which the quest is dedicated."[53] They are also what Walter J. Ong, following E. M. Forster, calls "flat" rather than "round" characters: "the type of character that never surprises the reader but, rather, delights by fulfilling expectations copiously."[54] Northrop Frye, in a book that draws most of its examples from classical and Elizabethan romance, observes that the conventions and structures of romance are remarkably persistent, the same motifs that appear in Greek romance reappearing, for example, in the novels of Walter Scott and in twentieth-century science fiction. One of the fundamental structures of romance in general, Frye claims, is the loss and recovery of identity.[55]

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[50] See The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi, Vol. 1, ed. Sarah M. Horrall (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1978), lines 1-25; and The South English Legendary, Vol. 1, ed. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, EETS 235 (London: Oxford UP, 1956), lines 59-66 of the Prologue. For the Speculum Vitae see G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961) 13, and Ingrid J. Peterson, William of Nassington (New York: Lang, 1986) 79-82.

[51] Attempts to define "Middle English romance" include Dorothy Everett, "A Characterization of the English Metrical Romances," Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1955) 1-22; Gibbs 1-14; Helaine Newstead, "Romances," A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500. Fascicule 1: Romances, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967) 11-12; Bloomfield, "Episodic Motivation"; Strohm, "Origin"; and Finlayson. "Romance" has been alternatively defined as a mode as well as a genre: see Frye, Anatomy 33-67; Gillian Beer, The Romance (London: Methuen, 1970); Pamela Gradon, Form and Style in Early English Literature (London: Methuen, 1971) 212-72; and Barron, especially 1-10. Jameson subsumes both viewpoints under his inclusive definition of "genre."

Recognition of the role played by generic convention in the structure and techniques of the Middle English romances also demands acknowledgement of their place in a historical context; many of their characteristics may derive, Gradon suggests, from their status as medieval texts.[56] In the first place, we must recognize Middle English romance as a branch of an essentially European genre. The Middle English Ywain and Gawain, for example, is a very free translation of the twelfth-century French Yvain of Chrétien de Troyes; but Chrétien's poem also inspired versions in German, Norse, Swedish, and Welsh.[57] In the early fourteenth century Middle English romaunce meant primarily a narrative in French or Anglo-Norman.[58] Chrétien's poems, classic and fully mature examples of their genre, were written almost a half-century before the earliest extant Middle English romances. Therefore the traditions informing the Middle English works are far-reaching, not only geographically but also temporally--reaching, indeed, beyond the Middle Ages into later genres. For the purposes of this study the Middle English romance tradition is assumed to have begun in the thirteenth century with King Horn; the endpoint is less clear, although Newstead's list ends with some sixteenth-century texts. (The Severs Manual sets a somewhat arbitrary end date of 1500 for its material.) I will focus on texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which display with sufficient variety the basic structures of the Middle English romance.

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[52] Gradon 270.

[53] Barron 5.

[54] Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy (London: Routledge, 1982) 151. Ong associates the "flat" character with oral narrative, but this mode of characterization is also typical of written romance narrative even in highly literate cultures.

[55] Frye, Scripture.

Despite the debt of the Middle English romances to French romance, it is possible to argue that the English texts represent a tradition in some respects distinct from the French. Larry D. Benson credits this English tradition for "Malory's occasional 'realism,' his apparent lack of interest in the psychological subtleties of love, his relative disinterest in the supernatural, his preference for a simple plot line with less interweaving than in the French romances."[59] W. R. J. Barron notes that the English romances tend to the mimetic rather than the mythic.[60] Susan Crane calls them "accessible," firmly rooted in the values "domesticity, economy, and good sense";[61] they tend to show a strong interest in contemporary social conditions, especially in legal matters.[62] The values of English romance tend to "produce satisfaction and not conflict."[63] Love, for example, is represented as a socializing rather than anti-social force, culminating in marriage, and the English poets often go out of their way to emphasize the sexual propriety of their protagonists.[64] Perhaps most characteristically, the English romances insist on the dynamics of narrative more strongly than do their French counterparts, centring the concerns of the poems in action rather than in debate.[65] The result is a narrative usually less complex, less elaborate, less detailed, and faster-paced than the French,[66] in which the characters are less finely drawn, the central characters more strongly emphasized, and internal monologues and debates, especially those about the anguished niceties of love, are articulated publicly as social concerns or omitted altogether.[67] Lancelot's infamous hesitation in Chrétien's Le Chevalier de la Charrette, his anxiety-ridden pause before, torn between the conflicting demands of his social code and his love, he steps into the ignominious cart, is as characteristic of French romance as it is foreign to English romance; an English hero, one feels, would have commandeered the cart immediately, without considering such action in any way extraordinary, and an English poet, unlike Chrétien, would probably not have considered it a matter for debate. Indeed, Malory's version of the story obliterates completely Chrétien's crucial moment of hesitation; Malory's Lancelot leaps into the cart without a second thought, whacks a recalcitrant carter so hard that he falls out of the cart dead, and forces the other carter to drive on. Malory's Guenevere, far from making a fuss, accepts the necessities of circumstance with similar ease. These differences between French and English styles of romance suggest that attempts to evaluate the Middle English romances by the standards of French romance, especially by comparison with Chrétien, should be hedged about with caution.

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[56] Gradon 270.

[57] Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, eds., introduction, Ywain and Gawain (London: Oxford UP, 1964) xv.

[58] Strohm, "Origin" 7-8.

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[59] Larry D. Benson, "Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur," Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and Herschel Baker (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1968) 110.

[60] Barron 217.

[61] Susan Crane, Insular Romance (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 139.

[62] Crane 67; Friedman and Harrington, Ywain and Gawain xxvi.

[63] John Ganim, Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 48.

[64] Geraldine Barnes, Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993) 16; and Crane 210, citing Sir Degrevant and The Knight of Curtesy and the Fair Lady of Faguell. See also G. H. V. Bunt, ed., introduction, William of Palerne (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1985) 35-36. Quotations from William of Palerne are from this edition.

[65] Barron 216-17.

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[66] Mehl 22.

[67] Barnes 16, 31; Mehl 17. For differences between French and English romances see especially Bunt, William of Palerne 30-36, and Friedman and Harrington, Ywain and Gawain xvi-xxxiv.

More often than not the Middle English romances suffer in the comparison.[68] But such valuations fail to consider that the English romances may have been measured against their own goals and standards, according to which character and ethics are represented not as occasions for debate and analysis but primarily as functions of narrative movement.

These features of the Middle English romances, as well as their concerns and values, may well represent the interests and ethics of their audience, which would have been significantly different than the courtly audience of Chrétien. The early view of the minstrel reciting the English romances to a mob of unlettered rustics in the village square or tavern having been largely discredited, critical consensus has shifted toward seeing the audience of the romances as consisting mainly of the gentry, the lesser baronial households and minor landowners somewhat distanced from the royal courts.[69] William of Palerne was commissioned by "þe hend Erl of Herford Sir Humfray de Bowne" (165), but its audience probably included not only the Earl but also less distinguished members of his household, "knights, gentlemen and clerks in his service."[70] The author of Arthour and Merlin specifies that the poem is in English for the benefit of nobles who know no French:

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[68] See David Matthews's remarks in his "Translation and Ideology: The Case of Ywain and Gawain," Neophilologus 76 (1992): 452-63.

[69] Albert C. Baugh, "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation," Speculum 42 (1967): 2-5; Harriet E. Hudson, "Construction of Class, Family, and Gender in Some Middle English Popular Romances," Class and Gender in Early English Literature, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 77-78; Barron 87-88; Crane 10; Knight 101. For the argument that the English romances were written for a plebeian audience, see Finlayson 51, and Bruce A. Rosenberg, "Medieval Popular Literature," The Popular Literature of Medieval England, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985) 66.

[70] Bunt, William of Palerne 19.

> Freynsche vse þis gentil man
> Ac euerich Inglische Inglische can;
> Mani noble ich haue ysei3e
> Þat no Freynsche couþe seye. (23-26)[71]

The Middle English romances can be considered "popular" not because they were aimed at a plebeian audience--they almost certainly were not--but because their audience was what Harriet E. Hudson calls a "low-context" rather than a "high-context" group; that is, the romances "reached a varied audience and were attractive to more than a single socio-economic group."[72] The Seege of Troye, for example, exists in four manuscripts that reflect the variety of its appeal, ranging from the illuminated Arundel MS 22 to the unadorned and obviously more cheaply produced Lincoln's Inn MS 150, which may have been a minstrel's pocket-book.[73] Thus the values reflected in the structures of many of the Middle English romances are basically those of the English landowners and their households, but the romances are always vulnerable to the introduction of other values that obscure, transform, challenge, adapt, and replace the ideologies of the gentry.

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[71] All quotations from Arthour and Merlin are from Of Arthour and of Merlin, ed. O. D. Macrae-Gibson, 2 vols., EETS 268 (London: Oxford UP, 1973).

[72] Harriet E. Hudson, "Toward a Theory of Popular Literature: The Case of the Middle English Romances," Journal of Popular Culture 23 (1989): 37. See also Barron 87-88 and Ramsey 209-10.

[73] Barron 117-18. See Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, ed., The Seege or Batayle of Troye, EETS 172 (1927) ix-xviii; the frontispiece of this edition also reproduces facsimiles of the first few lines of The Seege of Troye from each of the four manuscripts.

In focussing on the generic aspects and larger structures of the Middle English romances, I will generally reserve comment on the more well-known authors who have worked within and against the genre: Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Malory. Even the anonymous Sir Gawain and the Green Knight participates in this study only insofar as it is representative of its genre, although in many respects it is as unique, as self-consciously idiosyncratic, as the best of Chaucer. These Middle English verse romances, of whose authorship we know so little--only the authors of Sir Launfal and William of Palerne, respectively "Thomas Chestre" and an unidentified "William," refer to themselves by name--form a tradition that the more well-known authors used, celebrated, parodied, reworked, aligned themselves with and defined themselves against. As, indeed, do the anonymous romances themselves: in locating themselves within the genre they both reinforce and revise the conventions by which the genre is defined.

Lee Patterson has suggested that a late medieval reader would have read a medieval text, for example Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, in terms of its use of literary conventions;[74] understanding these conventions and traditions is, then, a critical priority. When we examine the representation of identity in these poems, this principle is especially important in the context of critical attention to "self-realization" and "individual awareness" in the romances: what is this self that is realized, and this individuality of which we are made aware--if, indeed, identity can be understood in terms of selfhood and individuality at all? In exploring the operations of identity in the Middle

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[74] Patterson, Negotiating 150.

English romances, we can recover some of the options open to the medieval English romancer in the creation, revision, translation, and transmission of romance narrative, and some of the ways in which a medieval literary tradition represented itself and its relations with the world.

Chapter 2

The Arming of the Knight: Definitions

> Jeg har altid prøvet at være
> mig selv. For øvrigt er her mit pas.
>
> I've always tried to be
> myself. For the rest, here is my passport.[1]

At the beginning of the Fillingham MS romance Otuel and Roland, the emperor Charles, keeping Childermass at St. Denis with his court, is unexpectedly challenged by a Saracen knight: Otuel, a messenger from King Garcy. Otuel delivers Garcy's challenge insultingly, trading boasts with Charles and Roland, and ends by challenging Roland to a duel. Charles arranges the formalities; the next day, after Mass, the two knights prepare for combat.

The romance contains an elaborate scene in which the Twelve Peers arm Roland, and Charles's daughter Belisant, with her maidens, arms Otuel. The arming is described in detail. We are told that Roland, for example, is given a haketon and a hauberk; Estre of Langares brings him a helm; he is girded with his sword Durendal; Reyner brings him a shield, Oliver a spear, Terry his spurs, Ogier his horse. Otuel's arming is equally carefully described, and the poem makes note of the appearance, and often the history, of the knights' accoutrements. The meticulous attention given to this scene, the ritualistic quality of the activity it describes, suggest that the arming of Roland and Otuel is a significant act; the arming of Roland in particular constructs Roland's identity as knight, as one of the Twelve Peers of France, as Christian champion.

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[1] Henrik Ibsen, Peer Gynt (1867; Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1928) 92. The translation is mine.

The arming of a knight is an especially resonant narrative convention in the medieval romances; Derek Brewer discusses instances of its use in, for example, Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Alliterative Morte Arthure, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Guy of Warwick, Octavian, and Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas.[2] An arming scene, such as this one from Otuel and Roland, describes not merely the equipping of a man but also, and more importantly, the assembly of an ideal.[3] This highly formalized passage, therefore, may strike the twentieth-century reader as somewhat stiff and impersonal. More attention is paid, we might say, to the armour than to the man beneath it; Roland is not described with any individuality, but is represented, rather, in terms of a collectivity, the community of Carolingian warriors to which he belongs. Moreover, if we view Otuel's challenge as an interrogation of identity, in the same way in which the conversation in the chapel in Ywain and Gawain is an interrogation of identity, Roland's reply is, we might say, rather unspecific: far from seizing this opportunity for "self-realization," he goes forth to combat as a representative of larger causes, so that the duel that follows is not so much a duel between Roland and Otuel as it is a duel between

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[2] Derek Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior in European Literature and Chaucer," Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1979) 221-43, rpt. in Derek Brewer, Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer (London: Macmillan, 1982) 142-60.

[3] See Elizabeth Porges Watson, "The Arming of Gawain: Vrysoun and Cercle," Leeds Studies in English 18 (1987): 32. On the arming of Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Watson comments that Gawain, "piece by piece," is "built up as a chivalric emblem."

France and the Saracens, Christianity and paganism, Charlemagne and Garcy. In what sense, then, is the arming of Roland a definition of identity?

I would like to begin this investigation by considering a suggestion put forth by Evelyn Birge Vitz in her Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology. Discussing the Historia calamitatum of Abelard, Vitz finds a significant difference between medieval and modern methods of representing character. Vitz distinguishes between a horizontal "axis of differentiation," which describes character qualitatively--by what characteristics someone possesses--and a vertical "hierarchical or evaluative axis," which describes character quantitatively--by how much someone possesses certain characteristics. She claims that medieval individuality was represented almost exclusively in terms of the vertical axis; in other words, an individual was marked as such not by personal peculiarities but by the degree to which he or she possessed qualities supposed to be common to all humanity or at least to the relevant categories of humanity.[4]
Although Vitz's scheme is rather too simplistic to account for the variety of ways in which medieval people understood and described character, it foregrounds some presuppositions worth articulating. Characterization along the axis of differentiation--what we might call "personal identity"--identifies the individual as unique, emphasizing an attribute or configuration of attributes that distinguishes a person from all others. Such a form of identification therefore creates an entity akin to the humanist subject, a self-realizing, self-sufficient, self-aware protagonist whose individuality is set against an

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[4] Evelyn Birge Vitz, Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology (New York: New York UP, 1989) 15-16.

external world. On the other hand, characterization along Vitz's vertical axis depends on supraindividual structures and categories. It presupposes, first, that a character belongs to certain pre-established categories; Roland, for example, is a knight. It further supposes that certain attributes adhere to those categories; a knight, for example, must be proficient in combat and in courtoisie. Only after these categories have been identified can a character be distinguished as being superior or inferior than others according to a common system of values.

Vitz's vertical characterization is a special case of what I would like to call "positional identity." This terminology recalls Paul Smith's idea of "subject positions" in his book Discerning the Subject[5] and H. Marshall Leicester's comment in The Disenchanted Self that "in modern theory the subject is not conceived of as a substantial thing, like a rock, but as position in a larger structure, a site through which various forces pass."[6] The version of subjectivity inherent in this kind of approach implies that identity is not a quality that a character carries about, but a position that a character occupies in various ideological spaces or, as I will call them, "recognition systems." These "larger structures" form the terms of reference by which a character, or the author, answers the question "What ertow?" The identity of a character, therefore, rather than being defined as a location on Vitz's generalized "vertical axis," is a position in any number of different and complementary--sometimes contradictory--recognition systems. Indeed, "personal identity," rather than being an alternative to "positional identity," is (like Vitz's vertical characterization) itself a special case of positional identity, depending as it does on what has been called "the ideology of the subject"--a recognition system that constructs, for whatever social, historical, or psychological reasons, a model of a continuous, a priori self.

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[5] Paul Smith, Discerning the Subject (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988). Smith's terminology differs slightly from mine; for him what I have called the "humanist subject" is the "individual," which corresponds to a fiction of "an entire 'subject'"--"either in the sense of being entirely submitted to the domination of the ideological, or of being entirely capable of choosing his/her place in the social by dint of possessing full consciousness or some such version of what can be called sovereign subjectivity" (24).

[6] Leicester 14.

One form of recognition system that has been extensively studied is the honour-shame system of certain Mediterranean societies, in which honour "is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society"; it "provides a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them." Julian Pitt-Rivers, whose article I am quoting, links honour very strongly to "a certain social identity": "When the English girl claims to be 'not that kind of a girl' she is talking about her honour, and in Calderón's plays the heroes invoke their honour with a standard phrase, Soy quién soy, I am who I am."[7] The individual's identity, in this kind of ideological space, is derived from rather than defined against the recognition of others; the Partidas, a "thirteenth century Castilian legal code," equates slander with murder, "for a man once he is defamed, although he be innocent, is dead to the good and to the honour of the world."[8] On the one hand, there exists a concept of honour as individual integrity, as a very personal status; on the other hand, the honour-shame systems that Pitt-Rivers and others describe show an acute consciousness of the social values on which that sense of personal honour rests. In an article that applies these concepts of honour and shame to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Loretta Wasserman notes that honour "does not rest on self-estimation of worth, but must be, so to speak, transacted--claimed, or asserted, and then approved, or at least accepted by others."[9] Again, I would like to suggest that honour is a special case of positional identity, which can also be thought of, in a general sense, as a transaction between the person who is identified, the social groups that identify, and the recognition systems within which the act of identification takes place.

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[7] Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," Honour and Shame, ed. J. G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld, 1965) 21-22. Compare the quotation from Don Quixote that I use as an epigraph to chapter 6: "Yo sí quién soy," says Don Quixote--"I know who I am."

When Otuel first arrives at St. Denis to deliver his challenge, he calls aside one of the French knights, Gauter of Amoun, and asks him to point out Charles and Roland. Charles is, replies Gauter, "he with the hore berde" (70);[10] the Twelve Peers, including Roland, are sitting next to Charles. Gauter's act of identification illustrates two ways in which identification can happen. Charles is identified by a distinctive physical trait, a personal idiosyncrasy; this type of personal identification is based on a recognition system that attaches identity to specific physical traits, and is relatively uncommon in the Middle English romances. On the other hand, the Twelve Peers, and Roland in particular, are identified by their position in relation to Charles--not just in terms of physical position but also by their position relative to Charles within certain ideological spaces. Otuel is already aware of these positions when he enters; his request to Gauter is that the French knight

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[8] Quoted by Julio Caro Baroja, "Honour and Shame," trans. R. Johnson, in Peristiany 84-85.

[9] Loretta Wasserman, "Honor and Shame in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Chivalric Literature, ed. Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980) 78.

[10] Quotations from Otuel and Roland are from Firumbras and Otuel and Roland, ed. Mary Isabelle O'Sullivan, EETS 198 (London: Oxford UP, 1935).

> woldyst me teche
> To kyng Charlyoun,
> And to Roulond, hys nevewe,
> That hath many a vertu,
> And grete of renoun. (64-68)

Underlying Otuel's request is the acknowledgement of a number of recognition systems: the political systems that identify Charles as king; the systems of family relationships that identify Roland as Charlemagne's nephew; the standards of chivalry, interpreted by Charles's court, that identify the Twelve Peers as the pre-eminent knights of France. Roland's physical position in relation to Charles therefore indicates his position within these recognition systems. In particular, Roland represents French chivalry and its king; although Otuel's challenge is primarily directed against Charles, it is more often Roland who replies, speaking on behalf of Charles.

The arming of Roland, then, invokes the recognition systems by which Roland's identity is defined. It is done at Charles's command and accomplished by the Twelve Peers; thus it enacts explicitly the relationships between Roland and his feudal lord, who is also his uncle, between the Twelve Peers and Charles, and between Roland and the Twelve Peers. More generally, it marks Roland as a member of an elite military fraternity, itself representative of the highest values of French chivalry, distinguished by a tradition of military prowess. We are told the histories of some of the pieces of armour. The helmet, for example, was formerly owned by "galyas" and "kyng barbatyan" (292-93),[11] the horse "was wonne in hongery" (314); Roland is being attired in the visible signs of a history of French victory. Thus the arming of Roland is not merely a matter of putting bits of metal on a man's body; it is a symbolic act, declaring Roland the representative of France, of Charles, of the Twelve Peers, of Christendom, of knighthood itself. All the Twelve Peers participate in the arming and, after it is finished, Charles lifts his hand and gives Roland his blessing.

In the romances, identity is represented not only as position, but also as a certain type of position. The central character or characters of these texts tend to be distinguished from common humanity by being pre-eminent in the categories to which they belong; identity is represented not in terms of seeing someone as unique but in terms of seeing someone as exemplary. Thus the arming of Roland is described in terms of superlatives: there is no fairer shield than Roland's (298); his spear is as good as any man's (304), as is his steed (313); his saddle is "The beste a-bouen erthe" (319). The excellence of Roland's arms is clearly meant to reflect the pre-eminence of the man who bears them. We might compare Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which also begins with a challenge--albeit a more unusual one--and contains a similarly elaborate and significant arming scene. Gawain is identified repeatedly as the exemplar of courtesy;

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[11] O'Sullivan, Firumbras and Otuel and Roland, notes that "galyas" is probably Goliath (p. 180).

even the cognizance on his shield, a sign of his identity, represents not his idiosyncracies, for he has none, but his status as most faithful human embodiment of the chivalric virtues:

> Forþy þe pentangel nwe
> He ber in schelde and cote,
> As tulk of tale most trwe
> And gentylest knyȝt of lote. (636-39)[12]

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, says John Stevens, is "concerned with the individual," but not in the sense of representing Gawain as unique and inimitable. "The Gawain-poet is concerned with the nature of the Christian knight, with what goes to make up the perfect, single specimen. He must have known that all men are different; his poem implies that all men should be the same."[13] We can compare Gradon's account of the description of Camilla from the twelfth-century French Roman d'Eneas:

> Even where we seem to have a detailed inventory of her charms, the details are typical and serve not to individualise her, but to indicate her perfection. The whole passage is a sustained superlative. . . . The passage has charm but its generality removes it from the sphere of the immediate to the sphere of the exemplary.[14]

We can see the results of this kind of characterization in Otuel and Roland and in other Middle English romances. One consequence of identity defined positionally is a certain uniformity about characters who are all exemplary according to the same recognition system. Otuel and Roland does not pause to differentiate, to "individualize," the Twelve Peers. Roland acts as any chivalric hero would--one thinks of Gawain's similar intervention on behalf of his uncle the king when Arthur is challenged by the Green Knight. Evidently, if every romance hero is described as the best knight of the world, all these Best Knights become inevitably somewhat repetitive. The two protagonists of Amis and Amiloun are so much alike that, when they trade places, no one, not even Amiloun's wife, notices the switch. Descriptions of Middle English romance protagonists are therefore strongly formulaic, serving as markers to identify their subject as the central figure of the narrative rather than as descriptions of physical detail or of distinguishing characteristics. The excellence of Roland's arms, as I have mentioned, reflects his excellence as chivalric hero; his shield, spear, horse, and saddle are described in superlative terms. But Otuel's armour is similarly praised: "no better myȝt be wrouȝt" (370). In any event, the quality (or equality) of their armour makes no physical difference, since it is soon hacked to pieces on the field of combat. Roland and Otuel turn out to be so evenly matched that only divine intervention can resolve the conflict.

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[12] Quotations from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967).

[13] Stevens 174.

[14] Gradon 244.

Identity represented as dependent on rather than opposed to the categories of common humanity allows, paradoxically, the audience's identification with the romance protagonist, who is, in Frye's words, superior to others in degree but not in kind.[15] The world of the medieval romances, says Gradon, "is a world in which people are magnified and formalised so that they are at once familiar and unfamiliar."[16] Sir Gawain and the Green Knight relates how Gawain, surprised by the lady's first entry into his bedroom, sneaks a puzzled glance under "A corner of þe cortyn" (1185) around his bed, sees the lady, and reacts by pretending to be asleep when she approaches him. Gradon calls the incident "particular rather than individual":

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[15] Frye, Anatomy 33. Frye is distinguishing the romance hero from the hero of myth, who is a godlike being and so different from others in kind and not merely in degree.

> It marks no progress in the development of Gawain's character; nor does it mark him off from the generality of other knights about to undergo trials. The reader does not exclaim "But only Gawain could have done that!" but rather, "But I might have done that!"[17]

This congruence of audience and protagonist is the basis for critical comment, much of it condemning or condescending, on the romances as "wish-fulfillment." That the identity of the romance protagonist somehow involves the audience's construction of its own identity indicates the power as well as the nature of these representational methods; the protagonist is exemplary not only because he or she is the ideal embodiment of values assumed by the text, but also because he or she serves as an example, an imperative, to the audience.

What, then, are we to make of Otuel? In a recognition system where the basis of value is military prowess, he is Roland's equal. Their only difference, that of religion, is marked primarily by the fact that, where a Christian knight might swear "by Ihesu crist, my lorde" (185), Otuel swears "by Mahoun swete name" (206); the theological, cultural, and political reasons for the opposition of Christian and Saracen are so much taken for granted that they are submerged to the point of near-invisibility in this text. In conduct and in combat, Roland and Otuel are practically identical. Jameson calls attention to romance's "positional concept of evil, . . . where the person standing opposite me is marked as the villain, not by virtue of any particular characteristics of his own, but simply in function of his relationship to my own place." A problem then arises in

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[16] Gradon 215.

[17] Gradon 246.

> the question of how my enemy can be thought of as being _evil_, that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute _difference_, when what is responsible for his being so characterized is simply the identity of his own conduct with mine, which--challenges, points of honor, tests of strength--he reflects as in a mirror image.[18]

In _Otuel and Roland_ this problem is resolved when Otuel is converted to Christianity--not because he is defeated in combat but because the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove alights on his helmet during his duel with Roland; he then joins Charlemagne's army and is promised marriage with Belisant. The two duels in the first part of the poem set up a system of neat parallels: the first duel pits a Christian Roland against a pagan Otuel, the second a Christian Otuel against a pagan Clarel. The elaborate scene before the first duel in which Roland is armed by the Twelve Peers of France is echoed before the second duel, when Otuel is similarly armed by the Twelve Peers; Otuel has become, like Roland, a representative of the Carolingian cause.

However, identity may be represented not only as a positive exemplary position but also as a negative exemplary position. Sir Kay in most Arthurian romances is the embodiment of all that is _not_ courtesy: boastful, sarcastic, insulting, tactless, he is correspondingly easy to defeat in armed combat. Extremes of another order are provided in Sir Gowther, the story of "a warlocke greytt" (22),[19] son of the duchess of Estryke and a devil, who at first lives up to his infernal paternity but is converted and becomes a model of Christian chivalry. In his youth he is a prodigy of terror, killing his wet-nurses and persecuting churchmen. After his conversion, however, he is renowned for his virtue; the Royal MS classifies the poem as a vita sancti. Whether devil or saint, at both extremes, Gowther is extraordinary. His early career as a son of a devil is very literally what Frye might call a demonic parody of chivalry,[20] a paradigm of strength without principle. His later career as son of God is also expressed by the use of unsurpassed strength, this time represented as positive because directed not against his family and against the Church but against the unchristened Saracen. Again, as with Roland and Otuel, one effect of positional identity is a kind of mirroring; Gowther as devil is not really very different, in some respects, from Gowther as saint. The two Gowthers occupy opposite poles of a specific moral universe, and so reflect and imply each other in spite of, or because of, their exact opposition.

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[18] Jameson 160-61.

The uncanny likeness of devil and saint is involved, somewhat more disturbingly, in the Richard of Richard Coer de Lyon, whose mother, the poem implies, is a devil. Richard's larger-than-life career bears out his supernatural origin; "Þis is a deuyl and no man" (1112), the frustrated emperor of Germany exclaims at one point. Having earned his sobriquet by tearing out and eating the heart of a lion sent to kill him, Richard further indulges his rather alarming tastes by eating the heads of Saracens during his crusade--at first inadvertently, later deliberately, as a strategy for intimidating the enemy. For a champion of Christianity his moral standards are peculiar. When Richard is told that Modard, the emperor of Germany, wishes to kill him, he refuses to attempt escape because he does not wish to offend Modard (1030)--a point of honour somewhat undercut by the fact that he has already killed the emperor's son and slept with the emperor's daughter. Nevertheless Richard is consistently represented as "Goddys owne palmere" (1430), a heroic man on a holy mission. Ramsey's claim that Richard is "more complex, more human, capable of error"[21] than romance protagonists such as Guy of Warwick fails to recognize that the complexities lie not in Richard but in the code of ethics by which he is measured, and according to which he is justified and celebrated as an agent of God and exemplar of Christian knighthood. The ideology underlying Richard Coer de Lyon encodes any opposition to Richard as that of an enemy--even when it comes from the Germans or the French, who, being Christians, might be expected to be allies. Ultimately the status of characters in Richard Coer de Lyon is determined not by their relation to God but by their relation to Richard.

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[19] Quotations from Sir Gowther are from Sir Gowther, ed. Karl Breul (Oppeln, 1886).

[20] See Frye, Anatomy, especially 147-50, 187.

Thus the representation of identity as position rather than as personality, and especially the romance representation of identity as exemplary position, implies that the tensions within romance characters lie not in the characters themselves but in the ways in which they represent the values underlying the narrative. At the most basic level the value-system is simple: whoever supports the protagonist's interests is classified as a positive character, whoever hinders or opposes those interests as negative. But the protagonist himself or herself has an identity only by virtue of his or her location in an array of recognition systems. Hanning's arguments for his view of "individuality" in the medieval romances thus seem somewhat suspect when applied to texts such as the Middle English romances, especially his claim that "individual experience" is the arbiter of meaning because "no larger social or providential system" exists. If identity is positional, then it depends upon, is constituted by, the existence of larger systems; but Hanning is right insofar as no one system ultimately determines identity in the Middle English romances. The ambiguities of the Charlemagne romances, Sir Gowther, and Richard Coer de Lyon indicate that the systems that locate and define identity in these texts are not only multiple, varying from text to text, but also complex, varying in uneasy disjunction within each text. Richard's peculiar morality in Richard Coer de Lyon recalls the troublesome congruence between heaven and hell in Sir Gowther: Gowther's mother the duchess prays "to god and Mare mylde" (64) but is answered by a fiend, which the duchess later reports to her husband as "A nangell com fro hevon bryght" (84). Positional identity, far from being simple, is more often ambiguous, uncertain, or paradoxical.

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[21] Ramsey 78-79.

For example, the sudden conversion of Otuel, its suddenness not atypical of Middle English romance, indicates that positional identity does not adhere to any concept of psychological continuity. The modern imagination tends to consider temporal continuity or consistency a prerequisite of identity; when David Hume in the eighteenth century sought to disprove the existence of personal identity he did so by questioning the ontological validity of identity through time.[22] But if identity is represented positionally, and not in terms of personal characteristics, then psychological continuity becomes gratuitous. Vitz remarks on the "compartmentalization" of Abelard's Historia calamitatum, on the apparent contradiction between Abelard the impassioned lover and Abelard the "pure abbot, . . . scandalized by the turpitude of his monks."[23] A similar discontinuity of character is common in the Middle English romances: one thinks not only of Otuel and of Gowther but also of Guy of Warwick, of Bertilak in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, of Alundyne's marriage in Ywain and Gawain to the man who killed her husband, of the conversion of the father in Emaré. If such shifts and conversions seem to us "unrealistic"--that is, psychologically improbable--it is because we are assuming a model of subjectivity in which personality is essential and predetermined. If, however, identity is not synonymous with an essential personality, then consistency through time is not a given but an accidental quality.

In this scheme motivation becomes expressed in terms of what Vitz calls "commonplaces": "to understand why someone behaved a certain way, one defined the category to which he belonged, and that provided the explanation."[24] In Ywain and Gawain Colgrevance's explanation for Kay's rude behaviour is that objectionable people, like objectionable animals, act their nature: "It es ful semeli, als me think, / A brok omang men forto stynk," is his epigrammatic and grimly resigned comment (97-98). If one characterizes people in terms of a fundamental, universal human nature, then some theory of psychological motivation is necessary to explain why different people act in different ways; but if one characterizes people in terms of their roles and categories within larger recognition systems, it then becomes a natural consequence of this viewpoint that different people inhabiting different positions in those recognition systems will, necessarily, act in different ways.

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[22] See David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (1739; London: Dent, 1964), especially the section "Of Personal Identity" in Book I, Part IV (Vol. 1, pp. 238-49 of this edition).

[23] Vitz 29.

[24] Vitz 31.

This absence of psychological continuity accounts in part for the lack of depth and the discontinuity often remarked in the Middle English romances and in much other medieval writing. Gradon, comparing Virgil to the Roman d'Eneas, notes that the French poem describes Camilla not in terms of motion and context, as Virgil does, but in a series of "static and detachable" vignettes: "Whereas in Virgil we see Camilla riding swiftly by, as she might have appeared to the bystanders, the Camilla of the French author waits for us to take an inventory."[25] Vitz, like Gradon, finds the most fitting parallels for medieval narrative in visual art: a medieval story "is structured less by narrative techniques--by transformation, unfolding, process--than by figures, in all the visuality and static character of that term." The result is "unity of pattern, not of process."[26] Medieval narrative tends to be, as Ong has remarked of orally-based narrative, "additive rather than subordinative": composed of events or instants ordered without explicitly causal links.[27] Jameson sees this mode of narration as characteristic of romance in general, describing romance narrative as "a sequence of events which are closer to states of being than to acts, or better still, in which even human acts and deeds are apprehended in relatively static, pictoral, contemplative fashion, as being themselves results and attributes, rather than causes in their own right."[28] He therefore calls for a move

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[25] Gradon 243.

[26] Vitz 119-20.

> to replace the older category of "character," as it dominates such psychology-oriented forms as the *Bildungsroman*, with that, more appropriate to romance, of "states" or world configurations: characters would then be understood as so many properties in the complex mechanism which effectuate a transition from one state to the next; while romance as a whole would be seen as a sequence of what, following Wagnerian opera, we may call "transformation scenes," in which, in some ultimate and unimaginably rapid pass between higher and lower realms, all the valences are suddenly changed, negative and positive poles reversed, and new complex or inverted or neutralized conditions make an unexpected appearance.[29]

It is easy to see how such a shift away from categories and structures predicated on psychological conceptions of subjectivity toward a system of what Jameson calls "states of being" and "transformation scenes" provides us with more power to understand texts such as *Roland and Otuel* or *Sir Gowther*, with their dramatic reversals and transformations.

Finally, positional identity is in a very strong sense a public value, grounded on reference to persons and structures outside of the individual, challenged and asserted and defined in public contexts. It is perhaps worthwhile to remember that privacy was, in any case, somewhat of an anomaly in an age that took for granted the presence of other household members--servants and retainers if the household was aristocratic--at what we might consider the most intimate activities.[30] As for Malory, Gradon points out that, in spite of critical efforts to demonstrate character development in Le Morte Darthur, Malory's "interest in people is social rather than psychological."[31] The duel between Roland and Otuel is not merely a personal quarrel; Otuel's challenge is directed toward Charles, toward France, toward Christendom. The arming of Roland is, as we have seen, a public ceremony, investing Roland with the authority of France, of the True Faith, and of knighthood, clothing Roland with tokens of French chivalry's victories over its enemies. Roland's honour is inextricably bound up with the honour of his king, his country, and his faith.

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[27] Ong 37. See also Bloomfield, "Episodic Motivation."

[28] Jameson 139.

[29] Jameson 148-49.

Even love, often credited with contributing significantly to the supposed interiorizing drive of twelfth-century individualism, is primarily celebrated, in the romances, in social rather than psychological terms. The afflicted lover, tossing and turning alone in bed in agonies of introspection, nevertheless joins the honourable community of "Love's servants"--a community pictured as no less organized and real as the military fraternity bound to a feudal lord. The painstakingly analytical soliloquies of Alexander and Soredamors in Chrétien's Cligés, Guy's tortured yearnings in Guy of Warwick, Troilus's love-sickness in Chaucer's poem are epitomes of conventionality, enactments of common knowledge. Significantly, lovers are motivated not so much by "their" love, that is by a love that belongs to and is peculiar to them, as by a universal Love to which they belong and of which they have become vassals; love is represented, in other words, not as an interior but as an exterior force.[32] In the English romances love tends to find expression in social codes, for example that of marriage; what we might be tempted to consider a private emotion is thus represented in terms of a public action. In Sir Degrevant, Melidor's room, where Degrevant and Melidor meet clandestinely, is described at great length: details of the interior decorating include fifty golden archangels, paintings of the Apocalypse of John, the Pauline epistles, "The Parabylls of Salomone" (Thornton MS 1455);[33] "þe foure Gospellorus / Syttyng on pyllorus" (Cambridge MS 1457-58); Saints Augustine, Gregory, Jerome, and Ambrose; statues of all the philosophers; the story of Absalom; Charlemagne, Godfrey of Bouillon, and Arthur; and, on the bed-hangings, the story of Amadas and Ydoine. The secret rendezvous of Degrevant and Melidor is thus symbolically circumscribed by the entire ideological apparatus of the medieval West: the codes of Scripture, of scholastic theology, of philosophy, of history, of secular romance. The lovers go to bed together but, the poet assures us, "or þei wer wed / Þei synnyd nat þare" (Cambridge MS 1559-60); perhaps all those apostles and theologians glaring down from the walls had a somewhat inhibitory effect.

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[30] Bloch, vol. 2, Social Classes and Political Organization 302; for evidence that this state of affairs continued well into the sixteenth century, see David Starkey, "The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c. 1530 - c. 1550," The Later Middle Ages, ed. Stephen Medcalf (London: Methuen, 1981) 250-51.

[31] Gradon 260. This tendency in Malory toward public interests recalls Anne Middleton's claim that a distinctive quality of Ricardian poetry is its concern with the "common good." See Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," Speculum 53 (1978): 94-114.

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[32] See Vitz's discussion of the Roman de la Rose, in her Medieval Narrative 64-95.

[33] Quotations from Sir Degrevant are from The Romance of Sir Degrevant, ed. L. F. Casson, EETS 221 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1949).

Still, representations of private spaces do occur in the Middle English romances. The arming of Otuel takes place in Belisant's chamber and is a much more private ceremony than the arming of Roland; it is, moreover, accomplished by Belisant and her two ladies, rather than by the fraternity of warriors that arms Roland. And Belisant's loyalties seem remarkably ambivalent. She warns Otuel not to underestimate Roland, and she commends him to the care of whatever god can best protect him: "thyke lorde that best may" (402). Later, during the duel, she prays on behalf of Otuel--without acknowledging that in doing so she is also praying against Roland, her father, France, and presumably the true God himself. Belisant's prayer creates, however briefly, the possibility of a space outside of the structures and loyalities in which Roland and Otuel are enmeshed, in which they act, and of which they are constituted. When Otuel is converted and is promised Belisant's hand in marriage, Belisant expresses her willingness in terms that, again, place one purely personal relationship above family and social obligations:

> y loue the more in hert myn
> thanne y do my fadyr and al my kyn
> that me to womman bere. (611-13)

This tension between private and public concerns is perhaps best illustrated by Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The very structure of the Exchange of Winnings ensures that no action of Gawain's, not even any action performed in the enclosed space of the bedchamber, can remain private or hidden, since by the rules of the game it will necessarily be transferred to Bertilak in a public setting. The Green Knight's challenge is issued in the public context of Arthur's court; Gawain therefore expects the other half of the ordeal to take place in a similar setting and is unprepared for the test in the morning stillness of the bedchamber. Only for the audience of the poem the hunt scenes, intervals of noisy, open, communal activity culminating in elaborate descriptions of death and dismemberment, provide an uneasy counterpoint to the intimate temptation scenes in the castle. But even in the quiet bedchamber, where Gawain dodges with wary dexterity the words of the lady, conversation turns on Gawain's public reputation; the lady is delighted, she tells him, to have caught Sir Gawain, "Þat alle þe worlde worchipez quere-so ȝe ride" (1227). Gawain's test at the deserted Green Chapel is, for all its isolated setting, no less a test of the virtues displayed publicly on Gawain's shield; there also Gawain discovers that the girdle he had thought to keep secret has been a ploy of the Green Knight's, even as Bertilak himself has been playing a part in Morgan le Fay's larger strategy "to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were / Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table" (2457-58). The test of Gawain's chivalry is therefore simultaneously a test of the chivalry of the Round Table; since Gawain is the preeminent representative of Arthurian knighthood and the Round Table the apex of knighthood, as conceived by Arthurian romance, the testing of Gawain is at some level also the testing of the chivalric ideal itself. Thus Gawain takes the incriminating girdle back with him to the public world of Arthur's court, where it becomes a heraldic emblem, an emblem also of the fact that there are no purely private transactions in a world where identity is described in terms of, and consistently deflected toward, social codes.

But Sir Gawain and the Green Knight opens up, as does Roland and Otuel, unexpectedly disturbing abysses of interiority, spaces in which the private threatens to undermine the public; David Aers, for example, claims that the introduction of private spaces creates rifts in the world of the poem, and in Gawain's identity, that the poem is finally unable to resolve.[34] Such rifts may occur in other Middle English texts; Stephen Knight and Terence McCarthy have argued, for example, that Malory indirectly attributes the downfall of Arthur's kingdom to the intrusion of the private on the public sphere.[35] The coincidence of public and private worlds that positional identity represents is always open to disruption and fragmentation; although the English romances tend to deflect concern toward public and social matters, and to see the creation of private spaces as undesirable, disturbing, disruptive, and subversive, they still allow the creation of such spaces.

It is no accident, therefore, that issues of subjectivity are, in these texts, so insistently formulated in terms of identity. For, again, identity presupposes apparatuses of legitimation, of recognition; identification is a transitive action, an interaction between identified and others that identify. It is, therefore, a public action--or, rather, it is an action in which private aspirations receive public recognition, and public expectations shape private aspirations. It destabilizes the humanist opposition between the individual and the world, precisely because it draws no definite and unwavering line of demarcation between those two entities. What we think of as "the individual"--and the word itself carries associations of indivisibility, of autonomy--becomes, in the act of identification, a construct of the structures and values of larger forces. When I am asked to show identification and I pull out a driver's license or a credit card, I am acknowledging not only the act of interrogation but also the institutions of state and finance--what I am calling recognition systems--that provide the context of that interrogation. The conversation between Ywain and Lunet in the chapel, the duel between Roland and Otuel, are also acts of interrogation, presupposing similar recognition systems. Identity is necessarily dependent on these supraindividual systems; in the world of the Middle English romances, one cannot meaningfully define oneself without the participation and recognition of others.

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[34] Aers 163-78.

[35] See Knight; also Terence McCarthy, "Le Morte Darthur and Romance," Studies in Medieval English Romances, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988) 148-75.

That the medieval subject is represented as nonautonomous, however, does not mean that it is also represented as nonessential, or that it disappears in a diagram of social and historical forces. To use Vitz's terminology, medieval subjectivity is based not on the personality but on the soul[36]--and the soul here is certainly conceived of as an essence, but one whose essential is not itself but its relationship to God, a relation that defines it and upon which it depends absolutely. In secular configurations the essential may be nobility, beauty, authority, or virtue. One of the central challenges of the Middle English romances, then, is the problem of how qualities can be represented as dependent upon extraneous relationships and, simultaneously, preexistent or predetermined. Another, familiar to twentieth-century theory, is the problem of representing the agency of a subject dependent for its existence upon, indeed constituted by, structures greater than itself. Positional identity, therefore, far from being simplistic, produces an array of paradoxes and tensions. The two-dimensionality of the Middle English romances--Gradon calls their world "a world without depth"[37]--does not preclude their complexity, as long as we seek that complexity not in the characters themselves but in the ideological and narrative structures that make them possible.

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[36] Vitz 85.

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[37] Gradon 215.

Chapter 3

The Woman in the Boat: Structures

> Mr Thompson, only just out of hospital--his Korsakov's had exploded just three weeks before, when he developed a high fever, raved, and ceased to recognise all his family--was still on the boil, was still in an almost frenzied confabulatory delirium (of the sort sometimes called "Korsakov's psychosis," though it is not really a psychosis at all), continually creating a world and self, to replace what was being continually forgotten and lost. Such a frenzy may call forth quite brilliant powers of invention and fancy--a veritable confabulatory genius--for such a patient must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment. We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative--whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a "narrative," and that this narrative is us, our identities.[1]

Emaré, composed c. 1400, is a fairly late Middle English romance, and is not considered one of the more illustrious examples of the genre. It is relatively short (1035 lines), notable for a density of verbal formulas and of structural repetitions.[2] The characters are typical, differentiated primarily by narrative function: the incestuous father, the beautiful and victimized heroine, the good king, the faithful steward, the wicked mother-in-law. Some of the main characters, such as the king of Galys and his conniving mother, do not even have names. Critical appreciation for the poem has been equally sparing. Edith Rickert says, a little apologetically, that "Emaré cannot be ranked high among the versions of this tale" and that "it is interesting chiefly from the point of view of origins."[3] Mehl claims that "the author was not interested in a sophisticated and dramatically effective presentation of his story," remarks on "the rather unimaginative and often monotonous style of the poem," and finds the value of the poem in its supposedly homiletic elements.[4] Gibbs more scathingly declares that "Emaré illustrates the depths of ineptitude to which English medieval romance could sink."[5]

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[1] Oliver Sacks, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales (New York: Harper, 1987) 110.

[2] Edith Rickert, ed., introduction, The Romance of Emaré, EETS ES 99 (London: Kegan Paul, 1908), xxvi. Quotations from Emaré are from this edition. See also Susan Wittig, Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances (Austin: U of Texas P, 1978) 18: Wittig's "formulaic count" of twenty-five Middle English romances shows Emaré as having the highest percentage (42%) of "lines which contain formulas."

One reason for such harsh judgement may be a somewhat narrow expectation of what a Middle English romance should be. Gibbs's definition of "romance" follows Auerbach, for whom the epitome of medieval romance is a Chrétien de Troyes poem in which a knight sets out to seek adventure and thereby to attain "self-realization." But Emaré does not fit this model at all. Its protagonist is a woman, and she does not set out on a quest but is cast adrift for refusing to marry her father. Her chief attribute is her beauty, her principal accomplishment sewing. Her enemies are her father in the first half, and, in the second half, her mother-in-law, who engineers Emaré's second exile but whom Emaré never directly confronts. The adventures in this poem consist of an indecent proposal, some malicious forgery, and a lot of drifting about in boats. It is difficult to see how Gibbs, following Auerbach's definition of romance, could even admit Emaré as a romance in the first place.

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[3] Rickert, The Romance of Emaré xlviii.

[4] Mehl 138-39.

[5] Gibbs 37.

There is a strong case, however, for arguing that Emaré is, in many respects, typical of the genre. The closing lines of the poem identify its source as "on of Brytayne layes" (1030), locating it within a tradition to which, for example, Sir Gowther, The Earl of Tolous, and Sir Orfeo are connected. The pairs of lovers on the robe Emaré wears--Amadas and Ydoine, Tristan and Isolde, Floris and Blancheflour--allude to other, well-known romances. The story itself--that of a woman exiled after slander or the threat of incest--follows a narrative pattern commonly known as the "Constance saga," and is thus related to a complex of similar Middle English romances: Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Torrent of Portyngale, Sir Triamour, Le Bone Florence of Rome. The Constance saga in particular is also the basis for Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale and Gower's version in the Confessio Amantis; there are echoes of it in Charles Dickens's Dombey and Son. The narrative conventions of incest and shipwreck recall Apollonius of Tyre, one of the oldest and most persistent romance narratives in Western literature, a story with classical roots but a strong legacy from Gower and Shakespeare to Pirandello in the twentieth century.[6] The spare style of Emaré, its heavy reliance on conventions both on the level of verbal formulas and on the level of narrative structures, make it useful for a study of the operations of identity in narrative.

If the Middle English romances are, as I have claimed, narratives in which character is described in terms of action rather than action in terms of character, then a starting point for an understanding of identity is its role in the structures of the narrative itself. In taking identity as a structural principle I am in part following Frye, who, in The Secular Scripture, describes the structure of romance narrative as a cyclical movement between "reality" and "illusion," or, in other words, between "identity" and "alienation":

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[6] See Frye, Scripture 44. There also survives a fragment of an anonymous fourteenth-century English verse Apollonius.

> Identity means a good many things, but all its meanings in romance have some connection with a state of existence in which there is nothing to write about. It is existence before "once upon a time," and subsequent to "and they lived happily ever after." What happens in between are adventures, or collisions with external circumstances, and the return to identity is a release from the tyranny of circumstances. Illusion for romance, then, is an order of existence that is best called alienation. Most romances end happily, with a return to the state of identity, and begin with a departure from it.[7]

Frye's "state of existence" is what Jameson calls a "state of being" and what I have been calling a "position." In Frye's account identity is a specific type of position, associated with serenity and freedom, a state in which one harmonizes with or controls circumstances rather than being controlled by them. It is thus constituted as a configuration of stable relations with various forces of legitimation or recognition--a configuration that is, at the same time, potentially unstable, since a change in or loss of any of its terms results in the disintegration of identity.

Frye identifies two main movements in romance narrative, a "descending" movement characterized by loss of identity, and an "ascending" movement characterized by recognition; to those two I would like to add another narrative convention for close investigation--that of disguise, which, although not a form of narrative movement in Frye's schema, is a motif of particular interest to any study of identity in these texts.

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[7] Frye, Scripture 54.

"Loss of identity" I will call "displacement," following Carol Fewster[8] (Frye uses the term "displacement" with a different meaning altogether); recognition then implies recovery or reconfiguration of a position of identity. Displacement and recognition are remarkably insistent structures, presented in a limited variety of forms, and Emaré provides a fairly clear example of their function.

The poem is easily read as a narrative of lost and recovered identity. Emaré's initial identity as the daughter of the emperor Artyus is destabilized by his marriage proposal; the emperor's infatuation with his daughter is a denial or subversion of what, in the ideological space of the poem, are presupposed to be proper social relations. When Emaré refuses her father's proposal and is cast adrift, therefore, her physical displacement parallels and represents her displacement with respect to the recognition systems that previously fixed her identity. When she washes up in Galys, she changes her name and obscures her lineage; Sir Kadore, who finds her, knows her only as Egaré, "an erles þowȝtur of ferre londe" (422). She maintains this incognito until the end of the poem; when she persuades the king of Galys to meet the emperor, she does not tell her husband that Artyus is her father. Emaré's second exile, the second physical displacement, is a further social displacement; she reads the forged letter as evidence that her royal husband is ashamed to have "weddede so porely" to "a sympulle lady" (631-32), and she ends up not in "a kastelle of mykylle pryde" (341) but in a merchant's house. The two displacements are resolved by the recognition scenes at the end of the poem, scenes that involve reconciliation as well as recognition. Emaré's identity is restored by the realignment of her relationships to her husband and her father. It is represented, therefore, in terms of a recognition system based primarily on family relationships and secondarily on the social status that those relationships confer.

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[8] Carol Fewster, Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance (Cambridge: Brewer, 1987).

It is worth making a note of two extensions, as it were, of Emaré's identity. The first is her robe, made at the emperor's command from the jewelled cloth given to him by the King of Sicily. The detail with which the cloth is described is striking, especially in a text that is ordinarily sparse in descriptive detail. Explanations of the significance of the robe range from French and Hale's reading of it as a "rationalized . . . love charm--originally given to the fairy Emaré by supernatural well-wishers,"[9] to Mehl's claim, following Hanspeter Schelp, that the robe is "an inseparable attribute" of Emaré, "in many ways symbolic of her inner perfections": "The portraits of famous lovers can be seen as an allegorical representation of faith, just as the unicorn (ll. 163-5) embodies chastity."[10] But surely both interpretations are misleading. There is no supernatural intervention in the poem, except for the grace of God; but neither is Emaré primarily meant to exemplify "the glorious survival of Christian virtue in all affliction."[11] Commentators who read the robe as an allegorical representation of Emaré's specifically

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[9] Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale, eds., Middle English Metrical Romances (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1930) 428.

[10] Mehl 139. Other commentary on Emaré's robe can be found in Maldwyn Mills, ed., Six Middle English Romances (London: Dent, 1973) 197-98; and Ross G. Arthur, "Emaré's Cloak and Audience Response," Sign, Sentence, Discourse, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1989) 80-92.

[11] Mehl 140.

Christian virtues ignore the fact that the robe is of heathen origin, that the figures on its corners celebrate not chastity but the loves of secular romance, and that the robe itself is a gift from Emaré's incestuous father, a token of an illicit and threatening obsession.

Like Melidor's room in Sir Degrevant or Gawain's shield in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Emaré's robe is what we might call an iconographic object: one that explicitly alludes to the narratives, codes, and systems that the text negotiates, to the ideological spaces within and against which the poem defines identity.[12] Mehl is right to call the robe "an inseparable attribute" of Emaré, but it reveals and intensifies not the virtues of chastity and faith (which the poem does not mention at all) but, rather, Emaré's beauty. The figures on the robe indicate that such beauty is at least partly understood as sexual attractiveness. The poem also indicates that beauty includes courtoisie, manual dexerity, and the recognition and approval of others:

> She was curtays in alle thynge,
> Bothe to olde and to ȝynge,
>   And whythe as lylye flowre;
> Of her hondes she was slye,
> All her loued þat her sye,
>   Wyth menske and mychyl honour. (64-69)

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[12] Compare Philosophy's robe in Boethius, De consolatione Philosophiae; see Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. V. E. Watts (London: Penguin, 1969) 36. See also Chaucer's translation, "Boece," ed. Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler, The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed., gen ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton, 1987) 398:

> In the nethereste hem or bordure of thise clothes, men redden ywoven in a Grekissch P (that signifieth the lif actif); and aboven that lettre, in the heieste bordure, a Grekyssh T (that signifieth the lif contemplatif). And bytwixen thise two lettres ther were seyn degrees nobly ywrought in manere of laddres, by whiche degrees men myghten clymben fro the nethereste lettre to the uppereste.

It is in such beauty, therefore, that Emaré is exemplary; the robe thus objectifies her identity. But it also reminds us of the ambivalent, even dangerous, power of Emaré's beauty. Before the robe, Emaré is already "þe fayrest creature borne, / That yn þe lond was þoo" (50-51), "the fairest creature in the land" or perhaps "the fairest on earth"; after she puts on the robe, "She semed non erþely wommon, / That marked was of molde" (245-46), surpassing even superlative. Emaré's beauty, so extreme as to seem unnatural, provokes an unnatural response from her father; her mother-in-law, shocked by the same beauty, accuses Emaré of being a fiend. Nevertheless, Emaré does not seem able to hide her beauty, even as she can never rid herself of the robe; she is wearing it when she is put into the boat alone, when Kadore the steward of Galys finds her, when the king of Galys falls in love with her, when she leaves Galys with her infant son Segramour, when Jurdan finds her washed up near Rome, and when she is reunited with her husband. When Kadore discovers Emaré's boat on the shores of Galys, he sees first the robe, "a glysteryng þyng" (350; cf. 699), before he sees the woman wearing it.

We can see Emaré's son Segramour as another extension of Emaré's identity. As he grows up in Rome he, too, becomes "þe fayrest chyld onlyfe" (728) and "worþy vnþur wede" (736). When the king of Galys lodges in Jurdan's house, Emaré sends Segramour into the hall to serve the king, "In a kurtylle of ryche palle" (848), even as Emaré once did in Kadore's castle. The king's response to Segramour indicates what his response to Emaré will be; only after Emaré hears that her husband responded favourably to Segramour does she reveal herself. In the same way, Emaré sends Segramour to test Artyus:

> When þe emperour kysseth þy fadur so fre,
> Loke ȝyf he wylle kysse the,
> A-bowe þe to hym sone;
> And bydde hym come speke wyth Emaré. . . . (979-82)

Segramour acts, in effect, as a recognition token; he represents Emaré where Emaré is unsure of her own standing, and so effects the final reconciliations of the story, restoring Emaré to a position of identity within family relationships.

Segramour's part in Emaré is a weak case of a feature common to the structure of the Middle English romances, what Susan Crane has called "doubling" and Fewster "diptych structure." Doubling can be either simultaneous or successive; that is, it can produce either two parallel structures focussed on two different characters or two successive structures usually focussed on the same character. Segramour is an example of simultaneous doubling; his service to the king of Galys in Jurdan's house parallels and recalls his mother's service before the king in Kadore's castle. He stands for Emaré; to some extent they share the same identity, the same position in the recognition systems of the poem--the system of courtoisie in which beauty and grace are the most admirable qualities, and the system of family relationships that defines, at the same time, the social status of characters. Octavian, another romance based on the Constance saga, follows the simultaneous and separate adventures of Octavian's twin sons, both of whom are kidnapped by wild animals, are raised by foster fathers, demonstrate their natural nobility in conventional chivalric activity, and are finally reunited with their parents. The classic example of simultaneous doubling in Middle English verse romance is Amis and

Amiloun, whose two protagonists are not only sworn friends, but practically indistinguishable, and who, at one point, even exchange identities.

More obvious in Emaré is successive doubling, which becomes the major structural principle of the poem. Twice Emaré is threatened, put in an unprovisioned boat to die, and is discovered on a foreign shore by a subsidiary character, who shelters her while she provides for herself by sewing. The parallel structures are reinforced by close verbal parallels: Rickert lists, for example, repetitions in descriptions of the love of Artyus and the king of Galys for Emaré, of the emperor's and the king's expressions of grief after Emaré is sent away, of the sea-passages, of Kadore's and Jurdan's discoveries of the woman in the boat, of the emperor's and the king's decisions to do penance.[13] As Maldwyn Mills points out, such insistent repetition tends to submerge differences into a general uniformity of structure, so that, for example, both the "ageing lecher" Artyus and the gracious and good-hearted king of Galys "seem curiously alike."[14]

Many other Middle English romances feature successive doubling. In King Horn, for example, Horn makes two journeys out from and back to Suddene, both times rescuing Rymenhild from undesirable marriages; the first journey out from Suddene actually consists of two successive exiles, the first to Westernesse and the second to Ireland. Successive doubling occurs also in Bevis of Hampton, where Bevis, after marrying Josian and being made marshal of England, is exiled again when his horse kills the king's son; in Ywain and Gawain, where Ywain achieves the first adventure and marries Alundyne, but then breaks a promise to her and goes mad; and in Guy of Warwick, where Guy's second career as pilgrim both recapitulates and revises his first career as knight.

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[13] Rickert, The Romance of Emaré xxvi-xxvii.

[14] Mills xiv.

Frye has noted the significance in romance narrative of mirrors and clocks, which he sees as "objectifying images,"[15] but which can be understood alternatively as images of repetition (a clock marks the linear passage of time, but does so by cyclical movement). In the Middle English romances the equivalent devices are, respectively, simultaneous doubling, which is repetition in space, or successive doubling, which is repetition in time. The function of doubling in the Middle English romances is not really "objectifying," in Frye's sense; doubling is not simply associated with what Frye calls the "night world," a state of non-identity or confused identity, but is integral to the basic structures of the narrative and to their construction of identity itself. On the one hand, doubling, like all forms of formulaic or conventional repetition, reinforces or validates certain values or structures: "the validity of Horn's prowess,"[16] or "an envisioned consonance between lineal descent and perpetual rights to land."[17] Mills finds that, in Emaré,

> the careful patterning of the events of the tale is curiously reassuring. In a dangerous world of unjust sentences and alarming sea-voyages it provides a reassuring sense of orderliness. Everything that goes wrong for the

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[15] Frye, Scripture 117.

[16] Fewster 15.

[17] Crane 27. For repetition as essentially conservative see Wittig and Ong.

> heroine in the first half of the story is bound to find its benevolent mirror-image in the second.[18]

On the other hand, doubling not only replicates but also revises, and its implications are potentially paradoxical: "Doubling involves difference, but also echoing or equation. Its difference connotes extension or progression, while its sameness connotes assurance and stability."[19] When Amis and Amiloun exchange identities to clear Amis's name, their tactic is fundamentally paradoxical; it depends both on the friends' sameness (they are so much alike as to be interchangeable) and on their difference (Amis is guilty of the crime, but Amiloun is not and therefore wins in the trial by combat). Thus the doubling of Amis and Amiloun problematizes as much as it reinforces identity; similarly, Guy of Warwick's second career both confirms and destabilizes Guy's identity.

As Fewster observes, doubling, or "diptych structure," is self-reflexive and self-validating, referring for its values to the text itself or to other related texts,[20] and therefore a narrative such as Emaré or Guy of Warwick comments on itself even as it repeats or reflects itself. Hence, also, the potential of these narrative structures to be both conservative and revolutionary, to reinforce ideologies or to subvert them. That Emaré, Ywain, Bevis, or Guy attain or recover a desired identity not once but twice implies stability, the fulfillment of expectations, destiny, continuity; conversely, the necessary corollary that they lose their identities not once but twice points to the fragility of those identities, to their uncertainty, discontinuity, and instability.

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[18] Mills xiv-xv. I am not sure, however, that the second half of the story is any more "benevolent" than the first.

[19] Crane 88.

[20] Fewster 20-21.

That very instability, the reversibility of fortunes, is a recurring theme of the Middle English romances; the repetitive circular movement of their narrative structure finds its most vivid expression in the familiar medieval topos of the wheel of Fortune, that inexorable instrument by which the poor and suppressed are exalted and the proud cast down to destruction and oblivion. Whether Fortune's activity appears beneficent or destructive depends, of course, on one's place on the wheel. Emaré professes to be a story "Of mykylle myrght . . . / And mornyng þer a-monge" (20-21)--of great joy and sorrow. The reunion of Octavian's family demonstrates, according to the Southern version, that "God kan turne wrong to ryȝt" (Cotton MS 1949), but the execution by fire of Octavian's mother illustrates, by contrast, "Þat falsnesse comeþ to euel endynge" (Cotton MS 1958).[21] Floris and Blauncheflur is professedly a story about the reversed fortunes of the protagonists, "How after bale hem come bote" (1308).[22] At the end of William of Palerne William and Melior tell their story "of meschef and of murthe, and ho hem most helped, / and how þei brouȝt were of bale to here bote þere" (4919-20). The protagonist of Sir Amadace defends his spending habits by invoking "God þat is bote of all bale" (201).[23] Later, when he has spent the last of his money, he is comforted rather than condemned by the White Knight, who draws attention to the universality of Amadace's experience:

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[21] Quotations from the Southern version of Octavian are from Octovian Imperator, ed. Frances McSparran (Heidelberg: Winter, 1979).

[22] Quotations from Floris and Blauncheflur are from Floris and Blancheflour, ed. A. B. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1927).

> Thowe schild noȝte mowrne no suche wise,
> For God may bothe mon falle and rise,
> For his helpe is euyrmore nere.
> For gud his butte a laute lone,
> Sumtyme men haue hit, symtyme none,
> Þu hast full mony a pere. (451-56)

The opposite movement, from success to defeat, is less common in the Middle English romances but no less conventional. The classic example is the story of the downfall and death of Arthur, the quintessential romance monarch. In the Alliterative Morte Arthure, Arthur, at the height of his success, dreams of Fortune's wheel and is thus warned of his impending defeat, an event as inevitable as his exaltation on the wheel. In the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, Bors's comment to Lancelot, acknowledging the impending disintegration of the Round Table, is resigned:

> Bors then spake with drery mode,
> "Syr," he sayd, "sithe it is so,
> We shalle be of hertis good,
> Aftyr the wele to take the wo." (1887-90)[24]

One of Arthur's predecessors on the Wheel is Alexander the Great, in his turn the central figure of another Middle English romance that describes superlative success ending in disintegration and death. Kyng Alisaunder emphasizes the instability of the world, the uncertainty of life:

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[23] Quotations from Sir Amadace are from Sir Amadace and the Avowing of Arthur, ed. Christopher Brookhouse (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde, 1968).

[24] Quotations from the Stanzaic Morte Arthur are from Le Morte Arthur, ed. P. F. Hissiger (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).

> Swiche chaunce þe werlde kepeþ--
> Now man leigȝeþ, now man wepeþ!
> Now man is hool, now man is seek;
> Nys no day oþer ylyk.
> Noman þat lyues haþ borowe
> From euene libbe forto amorowe. (6982-87)[25]

"Wrong" and "ryȝt," "bale" and "bote," "meschef" and "murthe," "wo" and "wele"--the Middle English romances understand narrative in terms of antitheses, of extremes. Their world presents strong contrasts, sudden transformations, insistent paradoxes. Even the movement of the duchess Fortune's wheel in the Alliterative Morte Arthure is not a slow grind but an abrupt turn, a quick reversal that spins the hapless mortal into the mud: "Abowte scho whirles the whele and whirles me vndire" (3388).[26] Identity is not process but position. It is lost by a sudden collapse of the conditions of existence, recovered in fortuitous and equally unexpected recognition. More often than not these losses and recoveries are causeless and unpredictable except in terms of literary convention; they happen, Kyng Alisaunder implies, because the world operates by "chaunce," or, as the French romancers would say, par aventure. An image such as that of Fortune's wheel thus points to two simultaneous and opposite meanings: one that the turning of the wheel is inexorable and predictable, the other that it governed by chance and unpredictability and random change, the proverbial fickleness of Fortune. The same paradox runs throughout the Middle English romances, insisting on both the inevitable fulfillment of destiny and the unreliability of the world.

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[25] Quotations from Kyng Alisaunder are from Kyng Alisaunder, 2 vols., ed. G. V. Smithers, EETS 227, 237 (London: Oxford UP, 1952, 1957).

[26] Quotations from the Alliterative Morte Arthure are from Morte Arthure, ed. Mary Hamel (New York: Garland, 1984).

The inescapability of Fortune imposes a certain air of passivity or helplessness upon the romance protagonist. Bloomfield, comparing romance to epic, sees the romance protagonist as "naked and exposed": "he is in a liminal situation where the unknown hovers threateningly over him. . . . He cannot rely on his own strength or on the rationality of the world."[27] Bloomfield's words recall Gawain's tests in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which come not when he is riding about in his wonderful armour but when he is lying naked in bed, and when he bares his neck in preparation for the Green Knight's axe-blow.[28] Vitz, writing about the Roman de la Rose of Guillaume de Lorris, notes that "the events of this story consist primarily of things done to the hero--acts that he undergoes and to which he reacts--rather than actions that he performs."[29] "If the improbable happens, it happens to the hero of romance rather than because of him."[30] Jameson, criticizing Frye's method of classifying narrative modes by the degree of power exercised by the hero, observes that, in romance, "the hero's dominant trait is naiveté or inexperience, and that his most characteristic posture is that of bewilderment."[31] Emaré shares her helplessness with the mad Ywain, the dispossessed Horn, the poverty-stricken Amadace, the separated family of Octavian.

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[27] Bloomfield, "Episodic Motivation" 112.

[28] On "passive heroism" in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, see Jill Mann, "Sir Gawain and the Romance Hero," Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994) 105-17.

[29] Vitz 67.

[30] Gradon 238.

But Emaré is not completely helpless. It is, after all, her initial resistance to Artyus that precipitates her expulsion. And she spends the seven years in Rome sewing, an activity that recalls the Emir's daughter who spent seven years making the cloth that became Emaré's robe, who sewed onto the cloth not only the figures of famous romance lovers but also figures representing herself and her lover, for whom the cloth was made. Like the craft of the Emir's daughter, Emaré's sewing hints at her ability ultimately to fashion her own ideal narrative, to be the author of her own story. For those seven years are also spent in raising Segramour, who becomes the chief instrument in the reunion of Emaré with the husband and her father; Emaré waits until the two men come to her, but when they do come she takes the initiative to construct their reconciliation.

The agency of the Middle English romance protagonist can, therefore, be a rather subtle and elusive quality; where identity is dependent on recognition systems rather than on "self-realization," in narratives in which the protagonist is more often in a state of displacement than of identity, the recovery of identity seems, more often than not, the result of fortuitous circumstance, of fantastic coincidence. The king-light in Havelok shines from Havelok's mouth when he is asleep; it is a quality beyond his conscious control, even when he is conscious of it. But the romance protagonist is often able, also, to master the tyranny of circumstances, to manipulate codes and systems so that recognition happens. In the next two chapters I turn to an investigation of displacement and disguise, narrative conventions indicating, respectively, control by circumstances and control over them.

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[31] Jameson 139. For this reason Diana T. Childress's attempt to differentiate between romance and saint's legend on the basis of the protagonist's "power of action" is problematic; see her "Between Romance and Legend: 'Secular Hagiography' in Middle English Literature," Philological Quarterly 57 (1978): 311-22.

Chapter 4

The King on the Shore: Displacement

> On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline case) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so--double, fuzzy, heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.[1]

The action of King Horn begins "vpon a someres day" (29),[2] when the king of Suddene, Murry, is riding along the shore of his kingdom with two companions, "Ase he was woned ride" (34). They meet fifteen shiploads of invading Saracens and challenge them, but, hopelessly outnumbered, are killed. The Saracens overrun the country and set Murry's son Horn and his twelve companions adrift in a boat. The rest of the poem is about Horn: his exiles, his battles with Saracen marauders and non-Saracen traitors, his recovery of Suddene.

It is an opening in many ways typical of the Middle English romances, and especially of the modes by which they represent identity lost. Displacement in the Middle English romances takes any of a number of limited and often interrelated forms, indicative of the recognition systems in which the authors and audiences of these texts positioned and understood identity. Most of these forms of displacement operate, at different points of the narrative, in King Horn: the death of the father, dispossession and exile, the slanderous accusation, the separation of lovers or friends, the impact of love. As varied as they are, these events all deny or reconfigure the romance protagonist's initial position in ideological space; thus they operate as dissolutions of identity, at the same time defining, by their loss, what the text represents as the elements of an ideal identity.

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[1] Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 207.

[2] Quotations from King Horn are from King Horn, ed. Rosamund Allen (New York: Garland, 1984).

Susan Wittig, in her study of the narrative structures in the Middle English romances, sees the opening episode of King Horn as an example of the common convention "death of the father." The function of this structure within the narrative is to deny the protagonist's patrimony.[3] In the narratives that use this convention the father is of significant social stature: king of Suddene in King Horn, Earl of Hampton in Bevis of Hampton, king of Denmark in Havelok, a knight in Sir Perceval of Galles and Gamelyn. The father therefore represents and legitimates the (usually male) protagonist's nobility; the death of the father creates a potential rupture in the continuity of the lineage, a continuity that ultimately calls into question the protagonist's right to his father's title. Functionally equivalent to the dead father is the disappearing or unknown father in Sir Degaré and Generides; there the recovery of the father and the father's recognition of the son play a significant role in the recovery of the protagonist's identity.

The father's identity, in other words, is necessary to the son's. Sir Gowther is an extreme example of the topos that the son's nature reflects the father's. The behavioural change that accompanies Gowther's conversion is not so much a psychological change as it is a change in patrimony; Gowther is a son of the devil who becomes a son of God. In Havelok, the Danish nobleman Ubbe recognizes Havelok not only by the luminiferous signs of nobility shining from Havelok's body but also by Havelok's resemblance to his father Birkabeyn:

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[3] Wittig 106-34.

> Þanne bihelden he him faste,
> So þat he knewen at þe laste
> Þat he was Birkabeynes sone,
> Þat was here king, þat was hem wone
> Wel to yeme and wel were
> Ageynes uten-laddes here--
> "For it was neuere yet a broþer
> Jn al Denemark so lich anoþer,
> So þis man, þat is so fayr,
> Als Birkabeyn; he is hise eyr!" (2149-58)[4]

It is significant that Perceval in Sir Perceval of Galles has the same name as his father, and that the sons in Octavian are named after their parents. Crane notes that in the Romance of Horn, the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman version of the Horn story, Horn's career is a recapitulation and reaffirmation of his father's, that Horn is, in effect, a double of his father.[5] The Middle English King Horn also stresses the continuity of identity between Murry and Horn; Horn's defence of Westernesse against a Saracen invasion parallels and revises Murry's failure to defend Suddene against a similar invasion. The connection between the two incidents is reinforced by the repetition of specific lines. In Westernesse Horn, like Murry, "Rod vpon his pleing" (32; cf. 635) when he meets

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[4] Quotations from Havelok are from Havelok, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

[5] Crane 26.

"sarazins kene" (40; cf. 640) on the beach. The exchange between Horn and the Saracens follows the same pattern as the exchange between Murry and his Saracens: "He axede what hi soȝte / Oþer to londe broȝte" (41-42, 605-06), and a Saracen replies that they intend to kill everyone in the land. The significant difference, of course, is that Horn repels the invasion, succeeding where his father failed, and so surpassing, and later avenging, his father.

That the son's identity is an extension of his father's, and that the father's identity legitimates the son's, explain in part why a romance called Octavian is about Octavian's sons; the narrative is about the emperor Octavian in so far as Florent and Octavian junior are extensions of their father, and the dispersion of Octavian's family is a dissolution of Octavian's identity. The identity of father and son also explains why King Horn calls itself a song "Of Murry þe kinge" (4), although it is about Horn. Not only is the son's identity constituted by the father's, but the continuity of the father's identity depends on the success of the son--success in this case being measured by the extent to which the protagonist lives up to or surpasses his father's reputation. The re-establishment of identity that marks closure in many of the Middle English romances involves the continuity of the protagonist's family. The sons of Bevis of Hampton become kings of Armenia and of England, and William and Melior in William of Palerne

> . . . haden tvo sones samen, ful semliche childeren,
> þat seþþen þurth Goddes grace were grete lordes after.
> Þat on was emperour of Rome and regned after his fader,
> þat oþer was a kud king of Calabre and Poyle;
> and miȝti men and menskful were þei in here time,
> and feiþful as here fader to fre and to þewe. (5509-14)

Havelok and Goldeborw in Havelok have

> Sones and douthres rith fiuetene,
> Hwar-of þe sones were kinges alle,
> So wolde God it sholde bifalle,
> And þe douhtres alle quenes.
> Him stondes wel þat god child strenes! (2980-84)

One element of identity in the Middle English romances is therefore patrilinear continuity, and a break or threatened break in that continuity represents a loss of identity.

The death of Murry in King Horn takes place when the Saracens invade Suddene, so that the young Horn loses not only his father but also the kingdom to which he is heir. Indeed, loss of identity by loss of land or other property is an even stronger narrative convention in the Middle English romances than the death or disappearance of the father. There was, no doubt, a socioeconomic basis for this close connection between land and identity; in a predominantly agrarian society, as M. M. Postan notes,

> land was not only a "factor of production," the means towards higher output and income, but also a "good" worth possession for its own sake and enjoyed as a measure of social status, a foundation of family fortunes, and a fulfilment and extension of the owner's personality.[6]

The ownership of land in medieval English society was closely tied to the concept of nobility. Marc Bloch in Feudal Society claims that the distinguishing characteristic of the medieval nobility as a class was that they lived off the labour of other men. In the twelfth century the European nobility began to consolidate into a legal and hereditary class, except in England, where knighthood depended rather upon landed wealth; Henry III of England issued ordinances in 1224 and 1234 that required every free man who possessed a certain level of landed wealth to become a knight. In practical terms this arrangement meant that, although knighthood was passed on with the property to the eldest son and so was hereditary, the system was much more flexible in England than on the continent.[7] The Middle English romances express the connection between nobility and property in terms of the identification of the protagonist and his property, so that the loss of property functions as a loss of identity.

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[6] M. M. Postan, The Medieval Economy and Society (London: Weidenfeld, 1972) 135.

The prevalence of this narrative convention in the Middle English romances indicates its significance. The action of *Sir Degrevant* begins when Degrevant's neighbour poaches on his lands. Horn and Havelok lose their kingdoms; the young Arthur of *Arthour and Merlin* must fight to establish his. Bevis and Gamelyn are cheated out of their inheritances; Launfal, Amadace, and Cleges spend too liberally and are reduced to abject poverty. When Cleges, a knight of the Round Table, arrives at Arthur's court as a "pore man," the king, failing to recognize his knight, asks a harper who the visitor is:

> He seyd: "My lege, with-outen les,
> Som-tyme men callyd hym cleges;
> He was a knyght of ȝoure.
> Y may thinke, when þat he was
> ffull of fortone and of grace,
> A man of hye stature."
> The kyng seyd: "Þis is not he in-dede;
> Yt is long gon þat he was dede. . . ." (493-500)[8]

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[7] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, vol. 2, *Social Classes and Political Organization* 288, 329-31. On the hereditary system in France see R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983).

[8] Quotations from *Sir Cleges* are from *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse*, ed. George H. McKnight (1913; New York: Gordian, 1971).

Loss of property also usually means social isolation for the protagonist; as the English author of Bevis of Hampton notes, glumly, "whan a man is in pouerte falle, / He haþ fewe frendes wiþ alle" (3593-94).[9] Wealth means authority over others, power over circumstances; ownership of land means an ideal autonomy. Horn and Havelok are kings, and other male romance protagonists attain kingdoms; even when the protagonist is not a king, as Bevis of Hampton is not, he acts with defiant independence and on his own authority. When the protagonist loses his property he loses with it freedom from the "tyranny of circumstances" and becomes, as Cleges does, isolated and unrecognized. When Godrich in Havelok forces Goldeborw to marry Havelok, the dispossessed Havelok protests that he cannot marry because he cannot provide for a wife. He owns nothing, not even himself:

> Hwat sholde Ich with wif do?
> I ne may hire fede ne cloþe ne sho.
> Wider sholde Ich wimman bringe?
> I ne haue none kines þinge--
> I ne haue hws, Y ne haue cote,
> Ne I ne haue stikke, Y ne haue sprote,
> J ne haue neyþer bred ne sowel,
> Ne cloth but of an hold with couel.
> Þis cloþes þat Ich onne-haue
> Aren þe kokes and Ich his knave! (1138-47)

Social displacement is further reinforced by the protagonist's physical displacement, in the forms of exile or imprisonment. In many of these cases the protagonist is originally intended to die, but the death sentence is mitigated to a sentence that allows the protagonist to live but isolates him or her from the community on which identity depends. The Saracens set Horn adrift with the intent that he and his companions should drown: "To schupe schulle ȝe funde / And Sinke to þe grunde, / Þe se Schal ȝou adrenche" (105-07). When Emaré is put in the unprovisioned and steerless boat, both times, she is expected to starve or drown, and her persecutors assume that she is dead. Havelok is first imprisoned with his sisters and then, after narrowly escaping being murdered with them, is given to Grim to be drowned; he escapes *that* untimely end only when Grim and Leue see the king-light coming out of his mouth and recognize him as the future king of Denmark and England. Bevis is similarly condemned to death and is saved by the intervention of Saber. Florence and her sons in *Octavian* are to be burnt to death but Octavian mercifully sends them into the wilderness instead. In the *Chevalere Assigne* Enyas and his siblings are taken off to be drowned but instead are left in a forest. There is even a rather ridiculous episode in *Guy of Warwick* in which Guy's enemies throw the peacefully sleeping Guy, bed and all, into the sea, and Guy has to be rescued by a surprised fisherman who sees the bed, with the helpless knight on it, floating past his boat. These narrow escapes imply a functional equivalence between death and displacement; by removing the protagonist from the social context that defines his or her identity, the evil usurper of romance effectually removes the protagonist from the world of significant existence.

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[9] Quotations from Bevis of Hampton are from The Romance of Sir Beves of Hamtoun, ed. Eugen Kölbing, EETS Extra Series 46, 48, 65 (London: Oxford UP, 1885-86, 1894).

The protagonist is usually displaced into a threatening or hostile territory. There the threats are threats not because they are directed against the protagonist but because they are impersonal; the most terrifying nightmare in the romances is the nightmare of being unknown. A foreign country, where no one knows or cares about the protagonist's name or station, is such a space. But a more threatening territory is the inhuman territory of the wilderness, where name and station do not even potentially matter. The wilderness of *Octavian*, into which Florence and her sons are exiled, serves such a function; it is full of "wylde bestys" (Cambridge MS 290) whose actions are unpredictable and who are (except for the lioness) unsympathetic to the plight of the exiles. It is a disorienting space; entering it, they go "Ynto a wode was veryly thykk, / There cleuys were and weyes wyck, / And heor wey fonde sche noght" (Cambridge MS 304-06).[10] We find in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the epitome of these oppressive wildernesses, through which Gawain rides alone in his quest for the Green Chapel:

> Mony klyf he ouerclambe in contrayez straunge,
> Fer floten fro his frendez fremedly he rydez.
> At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed
> He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
> And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode.
> So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez,
> Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.
> Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,
> Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,
> Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
> And etaynez, þat hym anelede of þe heȝe felle;
> Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe, and Dryȝtyn had serued,
> Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte. (713-25)

Here are all the elements of a typical wilderness: the sense of being "far from friends," the inhuman enemies popping up at regular intervals, the uncouth wonders, the wild beasts and assorted monsters. At the other extreme is the wilderness of Sir Perceval of Galles, where Perceval's mother takes her son after the death of her husband. Compared to Gawain's wilderness it is quite a tame place, but it is nonetheless isolated from the social context that would establish Perceval's identity as Arthurian knight. It still functions, therefore, as an amnesiac territory, a world in which Perceval loses himself in ignorance as profoundly as Florence in the wilderness of Octavian loses herself in confusion. In Ywain and Gawain, the mad Ywain runs away to the forest:

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[10] This is the Northern version of *Octavian*, preserved in Lincoln, Dean and Chapter Library MS 91, and in Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38. Quotations from the Northern *Octavian* are from *Octovian*, ed. Frances McSparran, EETS 289 (London: Oxford UP, 1986).

> An evyl toke him als he stode;
> For wa he wex al wilde and wode.
> Unto þe wod þe way he nome;
> No man wist whore he bynome. (1649-52)

"Here," notes Corinne J. Saunders, "the pun on 'wod,' forest, and 'wode,' mad, is striking."[11]

The most evocative of the wild spaces in the Middle English romances is the sea. The "ship al steerlees" of Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale (4390), the conventional rudderless boat of the romances, is an image of ultimate vulnerability, of lack of control, of human powerlessness in an impersonal and dangerous environment. Horn's displacements are marked by voyages across the sea; in many other romances sea passages also serve as transitions, especially as moves that isolate the protagonist from his or her accustomed recognition systems and thus serve as the removals into amnesia that Frye associates with "descent" or loss of identity. Such moves include the kidnapping of Tristrem by pirates in Sir Tristrem or of Guy of Warwick's son Reinbrun by marine merchants, or the selling of Bevis to foreign merchants in Bevis of Hampton. (The kidnapping of Reinbrun is a particularly dramatic, if unlikely, removal; the ship in question is blown by a storm all the way from Russia to Africa.) At the other end of a sea passage the protagonist often conceals, fails to mention, or even seems to forget his or her identity; Horn calls himself "Cutberd" in Ireland, Emaré changes her name to Egaré, Tristrem in Ireland calls himself Tramtris. The imagery of sea and shipwreck even finds its way into Sir Amadace; the impoverished Amadace equips himself with clothing and a horse salvaged from a rich shipwreck and identifies himself at a tournament as a shipwrecked prince.

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[11] Saunders, The Forest of Medieval Romance (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993) 137. See also Putter 18-27. Putter maintains that Gawain and Chrétien's Yvain "maintain their identity" in the forest (27), but I would argue that the forest, as a threatening and isolating environment, registers their loss of identity. It is, after all, Yvain's home after he goes mad and forgets who he is.

Horn's second exile from Westernesse to Ireland involves two more mechanisms of displacement: slander and separation. Horn's treacherous companion, Fikenhild, claims that Horn means to kill Aylmar, the king of Westernesse, in order to marry Aylmar's daughter Rymenhild, and that Horn's presence in Rymenhild's chamber is proof of Horn's duplicity. Horn later repudiates the accusation (1299-1305) but not all similar accusations in the Middle English romances are false. Desonell in Sir Torrent of Portyngale is set adrift when she gives birth to Torrent's twin sons, after their marriage is delayed; Amis in Amis and Amiloun and Ysonde in Sir Tristrem resort to underhanded strategy to avoid being proven guilty. Florence in Octavian is, on the other hand, unjustly accused and punished, as is her namesake in Le Bone Florence of Rome--or the Knight in The Knight of Curtesy and the Fair Lady of Faguell, where the love affair is Platonic.

Emaré hints at this fear of slander when she tells her father that the disclosure of incest would shame them both:

> Þe worde shulde sprynge fer and wyde,
> In alle þe worlde on euery syde,
> Þe worde shulde be borne.
> 3e ben a lorde of gret pryce,
> Lorde, lette neuur such sorow a-ryce,
> Take God ȝou be-forne! (256-61)

Later, in Galys, she becomes the victim of her mother-in-law's slander. The consequences of slander, as of other forms of displacement, typically include exile or some other form of isolation. In Athelston Egelond and his family are incarcerated on a false accusation of treason, and before Egelond undergoes his trial by ordeal he is stripped of the clothes that mark his social position: "From hym þey token þe rede scarlet, / Boþe hosyn and schoon þat weren hym met, / Þat fel al for a knyȝt" (582-84).[12]

Athelston is in fact unusual among Middle English romances in that its case of slander involves only political intrigue, while most slander in these texts is based on allegations of sexual misconduct. Certainly even these are often represented as instances of political misconduct as well; Fikenhild accuses Horn not only of sleeping with Rymenhild but also of planning to assassinate Aylmar. Other cases of slander in the Middle English romances similarly involve a situation in which a father or husband feels threatened by a younger and socially inferior male, and the perceived misconduct in these cases lies not so much in the extramarital relation as in its political repercussions; a woman of privileged status has offered her favours to a subordinate, who has taken advantage of that offer and so disturbed the structures of power.

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[12] Quotations from Athelston are from Athelston, ed. A. M. Trounce, EETS 224 (London: Oxford UP, 1951).

The slanderous accusation, especially when it is directed against the protagonist's sexual conduct, is an attack on identity because it is an attack on integrity. "Integrity" here implies not only loyalty to a system of values or to people whose relation to the protagonist are defined by a system of values--the kind of loyalty known to the Middle English authors as "trowþe"--but also wholeness, completeness, autonomy. In that sense, writes Frye, "virginity is an appropriate image for attaining original identity: what is objectively untouched symbolizes what is subjectively contained."[13] Virginity is, Frye suggests, especially relevant to romance representations of female identity:

> In the social conditions assumed, virginity is to a woman what honor is to a man, the symbol of the fact that she is not a slave. Behind all the "fate worse than death" situations that romance delights in, there runs the sense that a woman deprived of her virginity, by any means except a marriage she has at least consented to, is, to put it vulgarly, in an impossible bargaining position.[14]

The connection between virginity and autonomy comes out most clearly in a narrative such as Le Bone Florence of Rome, where, as Ramsey observes, "Florence's life, property, and identity itself are being threatened along with her virginity."[15] I would say rather that Florence's life, property, and virginity form a complex of interrelated ideals that I have been calling identity. The point of the confession scene at the end of Le Bone

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[13] Frye, Scripture 153.

[14] Frye, Scripture 73.

[15] Ramsey 180.

Florence of Rome is not to absolve the offending males but to clear Florence, to prove that through all her trials she "kept hur chaste and clene" (2163),[16] since all the villains are forced to admit that their evil designs, including the attempted rapes, failed. The scene restores, because it vindicates, Florence's identity, particularly in giving Florence power over her former oppressors.

Somewhat related to the loss of identity by slander is the motif of challenge, which threatens the knight's identification with the values that define him. Otuel first comes to Charlemagne's court, in Otuel and Roland, bearing a challenge to Charles from King Garcy. The young protagonist of Sir Perceval of Galles responds to the Red Knight's challenge not only to prove himself worthy of knighthood but also to represent the honour and interests of Arthur's court. The Green Knight in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight also tests both Arthur's court against its reputation and Gawain's worthiness as a representative of that court's ideals.. These challenges disrupt the ritualized order of the court and isolate one member from that community, necessitating the return and re-establishment of that individual before the honour, not only of the individual but also of the community, is restored. As David Aers has pointed out, the discourteous challenger interrogates and threatens "the very identity of the courtly community, its virtues, and goals"; in a society that judges conduct by public standards, honour is identity.[17]

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[16] Quotations from Le Bone Florence of Rome are from Le Bone Florence of Rome, ed. Carol Falvo Heffernan (New York: Manchester UP, 1976).

[17] Aers 158.

Fikenhild's slander in King Horn leads to yet another form of displacement: the separation of friends, lovers, or family. This narrative convention is very common because of the social isolation that usually accompanies the protagonist's displacement, but in texts such as Floris and Blauncheflur or Sir Orfeo the separation itself is the initial displacement. In King Horn the parting of Horn and Rymenhild is associated with a violent image from Rymenhild's dream, that of the fish tearing the net. The separation of Orfeo and Heurodis is similarly represented as a rupture so profound that it borders on the impossible:

> Þo lay sche stille atte last,
> & gan to wepe swiþe fast,
> & seyd þus þe king to:
> "Allas, mi lord Sir Orfeo!
> Seþþen we first to-gider were
> Ones wroþ neuer we were,
> Bot euer ich haue y-loued þe
> As mi liif, & so þou me;
> Ac now we mot delen ato
> --Do þe best, for y mot go."
> "Allas!" quaþ he, "For-lorn icham!
> Whider wiltow go, & to wham?
> Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe,
> & whider y go þou schalt wiþ me." (117-30)[18]

If we allow Bloomfield's claim that the beloved "is, in the medieval physiology of love, oneself,"[19] it is easy to see the separation of Orfeo and Heurodis as a disjunction of identity, so great that Orfeo leaves his kingdom to wander unrecognized and alone in the wilderness.

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[18] Quotations from Sir Orfeo are from Sir Orfeo, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966).

[19] Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Problem of the Hero in the Later Middle Ages," Concepts of the Hero in the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Norman T. Burns and Christopher Reagan (Albany: State U of New York P, 1975) 44.

In Guy of Warwick the initial displacement happens not when Guy leaves Felice but when he falls in love. Love becomes displacement when its object is unattainable. Guy cannot marry Felice because he is only the steward's son; his love for her therefore places him in a position of insufficiency. Felice's response to Guy's first declaration of love puts him firmly in his place: "Artow þis, Gij, so mot þou go, / Þe steward sone Suward, / Ich wene þou art a fole musard!" (Auchinleck MS 378-80).[20] As interrogation, love forces the protagonist to define his position in terms of another's position, and Guy describes the resulting emotional distress in the language of alienation and annihilation:

> Loue, bring me of þis wodenisse,
> & bring me in to sum lisse,
> For to reste me aþrowe,
> Þat y miȝt meseluen knowe. (Auchinleck MS 429-32)

"Worþi ich were ded to be: / Y loue þing þat loueþ nouȝt me" (Auchinleck MS 449-50). When Melior in William of Palerne falls in love with William, she describes her emotional state with the familiar displacement image of the rudderless boat: "I sayle now in þe see as schip boute mast, / boute anker or ore or ani semlyche sayle" (567-68).

Love is hardly ever, in these texts, a matter of a merely private relationship; female characters are often closely connected to property or social standing. After Guy's marriage to Felice, he is "holden lord of mani a toun" (Auchinleck MS 20.2); in the same way, Havelok's marriage to Goldeborw makes him king not just of Denmark but also of England, William of Palerne becomes emperor of Rome through his marriage to Melior, and Ywain becomes lord of Alundyne's lands when he marries Alundyne. Throughout Sir Eglamour of Artois, the woman Christabelle and the land of Artois are continually associated; Eglamour engages in various feats of arms in order to win both "þe maydyn clere" and "alle Artasse bothe ferre and nere" (226-27). When Eglamour leaves to accomplish his ordeal, he warns Pryncesamour: "Kepe wele my lady and my lande" (244).[21] The neatness of the alliterative formula hints at a social trend, the increasingly common practice of acquiring property through marriage.[22] In the separation and reunion of lovers, therefore, more is often at stake than the love-relationship itself; the protagonist's identity as defined by his or her personal relationships may also be connected to his or her identity as defined by various socioeconomic recognition systems.

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[20] Quotations from Guy of Warwick are from The Romance of Guy of Warwick, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS Extra Series 42, 49, 59 (London: Trübner, 1883, 1887, 1891), rpt. in one vol. 1966. Quotations from the first part of the Auchinleck Guy are cited by line number; quotations from the second part of the Auchinleck Guy are cited by stanza and line numbers.

The various forms of displacement in the Middle English romances cluster around and support one another; even a relatively straightforward narrative such as King Horn contains most of them. Furthermore, the episodic structure of romance narrative allows displacements throughout the narrative, each of which must be reversed before the protagonist is restored to a position of identity. The protagonist's movement away from identity registers not only in physical displacement--the exile or quest that takes the protagonist across the sea or into the wilderness--but also in the protagonist's answers to an insistent interrogation, a repeated demand that the protagonist identify himself or herself. Horn's answers to the question of his identity are straightforward at first but become increasingly indirect and evasive as the narrative progresses and as he moves deeper into a world of indeterminacy and subterfuge, where the ordinary recognition systems set up by society are confused or impotent.[23]

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[21] Quotations from Sir Eglamour of Artois are from Sir Eglamour of Artois, ed. Frances E. Richardson, EETS 256 (London: Oxford UP, 1965).

[22] Postan 33; Postan connects this trend to a "land hunger" in the late thirteenth century. Hudson, "Construction" 81-82, connects this increasing preoccupation in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English romances to "an obsessive concern for the preservation and extension of property and the advancement of family through marriage" in the English gentry of that time.

Appropriately, therefore, many significant encounters in King Horn take place "Bi þe se side" (33, 137, 974)--on the shore, the border region between property and landlessness, stability and chaos, community and isolation, civilization and wilderness, safety and danger, authority and helplessness, identity and anonymity. The seaside encounters in King Horn form an index of interrogations, a succession of challenges that register the status of Horn's identity at various points in the poem: Murry's defeat by the Saracens on the shores of Suddene, Horn's landing in Westernesse, Horn's defence of Westernesse against the Saracens, Horn's landing in Ireland, Horn's defence of Ireland against the Saracens, Horn's landing in Suddene. With almost obsessive insistence, Horn reverses the fate of his father on the beach, twice defending a land against invading Saracens, inadvertently killing his father's killer in the defence of Ireland, and finally retaking Suddene and becoming its king. But the repetitiveness of the poem's structure also hints at its underlying instability; the kingdoms of King Horn are all bordered by a troubled sea, and repeatedly the sea serves to bring foreign invaders to Horn or to separate him from his rights and his loves, challenging and undermining identity.

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[23] See Ganim 39-40.

We can understand in these terms, then, Ywain's answer to the voice in the chapel, in the episode from Ywain and Gawain with which this study opened. He answers the question "What ertou?" not by saying what he is, but by describing what he now is not: "a man." The Middle English text describes this manhood as an ideal feudal autonomy: Ywain was a man with others under his command, the lord of "a ful faire seignory" (2121), the husband of a noble lady. (The marriage to the noble lady, it is worth noting, was the means by which the retainers and the property were attained.) The position by which all Ywain's other positions are measured--in this case Ywain recalls his former position in order to emphasize the distance at which he is now removed from it--is precisely that position of autonomy and stability that Frye calls identity. The interrogation in the chapel reveals Ywain's loss of identity, and is itself surrounded by structures and images associated with that loss: Ywain's estrangement from Alundyne, his madness, his isolation in the forest, his insistence on anonymity. The chapel itself, associated with Alundyne and with Ywain's victory over the first Knight of the Fountain, recalls the more poignantly the magnitude of Ywain's loss. Ywain has returned to the same position in physical space, but in ideological space, so to speak, he occupies a wholly different position, failing to recognize the voice in the chapel even as the unseen questioner fails to recognize him.

As Frye has observed, most of the action of romance takes place not at but away from the state of identity, in an uncertain world whose vagaries and indifferences threaten to overwhelm the protagonist. There the threat is not so much physical annihilation as it is the annihilation of identity, of which physical death is only one form. Isolated from the structures that create recognition, the protagonist moves haphazardly, disinherited, dispossessed, dishonoured, vulnerable, alone, unrecognized. In contrast to the state of identity, where all variables are stable and known, the state of alienation or displacement is characterized by ambiguity, duplicity, and uncertainty. It is to one of these ambiguous but persistent narrative structures that I next turn.

Chapter 5

The Horned Horse: Disguise

Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.[1]

Octavian contains a peculiar little episode in which Florent's foster-father, Clement, hearing of a marvellous horned horse owned by the Sultan, determines to steal it. He disguises himself as a nondescript Saracen in the Northern version, as a palmer in the Southern version, and travels to the Sultan's court, where he passes himself off as an expert horseman and so gains access to the horned horse. This episode is not strictly necessary to the development of the narrative, but both English versions maintain it. The Southern version especially shows the influence of conventions common in other Middle English romances.[2] The Northern Clement captures the horse for Florent, but the Southern Clement seems to do it simply for amusement; he presents the horse to the King of France and nothing further comes of the incident. The purpose of the episode itself seems to be, as the purpose of the act is for Clement, mere entertainment; there is a certain satisfaction in seeing Clement's daring plan, his conventional disguise, his outrageous lies succeed so neatly. Although Clement is a subordinate character, his little escapade in disguise links him to the protagonist of many a Middle English romance, where disguise is a persistent narrative convention.

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[1] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 1889, Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde, ed. Stanley Weintraub (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1968) 195.

[2] See McSparran's comments in her edition of the Southern Octavian, Octovian Imperator 49, 107.

One standard reading of the disguise motif in the Middle English romances is that it operates as a device for investigating the contrasts between appearance and reality.[3] But any attempt to develop such a reading demonstrates its difficulties and inadequacies. The opposition of appearance and reality is very seldom an issue in the Middle English romances; it is not really appropriate to ask, for example, which of the Green Knight or Bertilak is real and which a mere appearance. Even a passing comparison of the Middle English romances and, say, Don Quixote or The Faerie Queene reveals in the Middle English romances no ontological crisis of the same scope and kind as appears in the later texts. What issues, then, does disguise raise in the Middle English romances?

A survey of the Middle English romances shows a range of situations in which characters are engaged in disguise. Occasionally characters disguise themselves as others: Clement in the Southern Octavian claims to be the keeper of Arthur's horse; Neptanabus in Kyng Alisaunder disguises himself as Jupiter Ammon; in Arthour and Merlin, Merlin disguises Vter Pendragon as Tintagel so that they can gain access to Ygerne; Amis and Amiloun trade places for the trial by combat. More often, however, the disguise involves non-identity rather than alternate identity. In Horn Child, an early-fourteenth-century version of the Horn story, Horn's alias in Ireland is "Godebounde";

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[3] See, for example, Ramsey 56, and Richmond, "Popularity," 165-66. For an alternative reading, based on the Anglo-Norman Ipomédon of Hue de Rotelande, see Michel Stanesco, "Le Secret de l'estrange chevalier," The Spirit of the Court, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985) 339-49.

Mills in his edition of *Horn Child* suggests that the element +*bounde* may signify "vassal" or "retainer,"[4] reflecting Horn's displacement from potential king to unrecognized bondsman. Tristrem reverses his name and calls himself Tramtris, hinting at the reversal of his fortunes. Emaré changes her name to Egaré, which Rickert in her edition of *Emaré* derives from the French *esgarée*, "outcast";[5] the hermit in *Sir Degaré* explains the related name "Degaré" as meaning "þing þat not neuer whar it is / Or þing þat is negȝ forlorn also" (256-57).[6] A change of armour also confers anonymity; a common convention involves the knight who participates incognito in a tournament, wearing armour of different colours (the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, *Sir Gowther*, *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Ipomadon*, Malory).

The most common disguises are, indeed, representations of displacement. Identity being most commonly represented by figures of authority and location, its antithesis is most commonly represented by figures of powerlessness and dislocation: beggars and pilgrims. The figure of the pilgrim is particularly resonant, associated in the Middle English romances not so much with the geographical and spiritual goals of pilgrimage as with dispossession, isolation, anonymity, and homelessness; hence the ubiquity in these texts of the palmer, the "professional pilgrim," indefinitely displaced.[7] In Octavian Florence, exiled and alone, decides to become a pilgrim; the Southern version has Clement, his wife, and the sultan's daughter fleeing to Gascony "In slaueynys, as þey palmers were" (1547), after the Saracens take Paris and capture the emperor Octavian and Florent. Arthur in the Alliterative Morte Arthure, after his dream of Fortune's wheel, puts on rich clothes and goes out alone into the fields. There he meets

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[4] Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Horn Childe and Maiden Rimnild* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1988) 117.

[5] Rickert, *The Romance of Emaré* xxix.

[6] Quotations from *Sir Degaré* are from *Sire Degarre*, ed. Gustav Schleich (Heidelberg: Winter, 1929).

> A renke in a rownde cloke   with righte rowmme clothes
> With hatte and with heyghe schone,   homely and rownde;
> With flatte ferthynges the freke   was floreschede all ouer,
> Manye schredys and schragges   at his skyrttes hynnges,
> With scrippe ande with slawyn   and skalopis inewe,
> Both pyke and palme,   alls pilgram hym scholde. (3470-75)

The contrast between "the riche kynge" (3456) in his gem-studded clothes and the fantastic stranger with his "schredys and schragges" is pointed; the king still sees himself at the top of the wheel, master of many lands, and from this perspective the pilgrim is his opposite, a homeless and helpless wanderer. Arthur condescendingly reminds the stranger of a pilgrim's vulnerability and of the king's control:

> Whedire wilnez thowe, wye,   walkande thyn onne?
> Qwhylls þis werlde es o werre,   a wathe I it holde.
> Here es ane enmye with oste,   vndire ȝone vynes;
> And they see the, forsothe   sorowe the betyddes!
> Bot ȝif thow hafe condethe   of þe kynge selfen,

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[7] On palmers see James A. Brundage, Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1969) 18, 124-25; Sidney Heath, Pilgrim Life in the Middle Ages (Boston: Houghton, 1912) 99; J. J. Jusserand, English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages, 4th ed., 1950, trans. Lucy Toulmin Smith (London: Methuen, 1961) 211; Christian K. Zacher, Curiosity and Pilgrimage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 55. On instances of the pilgrim-disguise motif see Francis P. Magoun Jr., "Hymselven Lik a Pilgrym to Desgise: Troilus, V, 1577," MLN 59 (1944): 176-78.

Knaues will kill the   and keppe at thow haues;
And if þou halde þe hey waye,   they hente the also,
Bot if thow hastyly hafe helpe   of his hende knyghttes. (3479-86)

As it happens, however, the pilgrim is Sir Craddoke, "Kepare of Karlyon" (3512), the king's own knight, on the way to Rome to bring news of Modrede's usurpation of the English throne. The pilgrim, in fact, is no remote stranger, but herald and emblem of Arthur's own loss.

Our investigation of disguise, therefore, is somewhat complicated by the fact that in many cases disguise takes the form of displacement. Horn, Tristrem, and Emaré do not change their names to hide their "real identities" but to reflect their loss of identity; their aliases are not, therefore, properly disguises. The distinction is subtle, perhaps not always possible to maintain. Barnes says of Orfeo that "When he announces himself to the fairy king as 'bot a pover minstrel' (l. 430), he is giving an accurate account of his circumstances; but when he returns to the 'real' world of Winchester, Orfeo's pose as a 'minstrel of pover liif' (l. 486) becomes a calculated disguise."[8] The only difference between Orfeo in Faery and Orfeo in Winchester is that in Winchester he borrows a beggar's clothing. Clement, disguised as a palmer when he steals the sultan's horse in the Southern Octavian, is a genuine palmer when he purchases Florent, and in the Southern version becomes a palmer again when he escapes after the capture of Paris. In a world in which beggars were kings and pilgrims are knights, in which disguise often takes the form of displacement, what value is there in distinguishing between displacement and disguise?

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[8] Barnes 121-22.

Disguise tends to be employed for a specific purpose, that of gaining access to a space that is normally inaccessible. Disguise as a beggar or pilgrim therefore has a strategic advantage related to the historical privileges of these vagrants; pilgrims, for example, could claim the right to personal protection and the right to hospitality.[9] As a pilgrim or a beggar, the romance protagonist is not easily noticed and gains ready admittance to the courts of generously inclined nobles, or at least of nobles who wish to appear generously inclined. But the further aims of disguise remain generally foggy. Orfeo says specifically that his disguise was a plan to test the faithfulness of his steward; Richard's disguise in colour-coded armour, in Richard Coer de Lyon, is meant to test the prowess of his knights. Clement's disguise is obviously a strategem for gaining privileged access to the sultan's horse. But Horn's disguise in King Horn seems oddly irrelevant at a practical level. The disguise is not a military tactic for penetrating the enemy stronghold, because the conquest of the castle is accomplished later by sheer force. That the disguise is meant solely to test Rymenhild's faithfulness is not entirely convincing either; the palmer has already told Horn of Rymenhild's obvious distress at the upcoming wedding. And why, when in disguise, does Horn keep giving Rymenhild hints about his identity? As Ganim points out, the episode raises more questions than it answers:

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[9] Brundage 12-15.

> Why does he put off his revelation and so torture her? To test her faith? To protect her? Why does he wait until she is on the brink of suicide? . . . At the center of the poem is this remarkable recognition scene, but a recognition obscured by a disguise, a dream, the long forgotten details of that dream, and by the evocative symbolism of the ring and the cup.[10]

To begin to answer these questions, I wish to observe first that disguise is almost always represented in the Middle English romances as a positive, or at least morally indifferent, activity. In *Kyng Alisaunder* a Persian knight disguises himself in a Greek knight's armour and manages by this strategem to attack Alexander in battle. After the Persian knight is captured, the Greek nobles debate his proper punishment, the majority condemning him to death for treason. Tholomeus the marshal protests, arguing that "Euery man to slen his foo / Dyuers gynne so shal do" (4010-11). Alexander follows Tholomeus's advice, praising the Persian for his "hardy dede in grete queyntise" (4047) and generously honouring the enemy knight with rich new clothing, a horse, other wealth, and a safe-conduct back to the Persian camp. The episode is exceptional, in that it involves an enemy capable of disguise; generally romance enemies lack the intelligence necessary for such trickery, and disguise is usually an activity of the protagonist or the protagonist's allies. But this incident of the Persian knight demonstrates that, even when disguise *is* an enemy activity, it is heartily commended and genuinely admired.

Frye claims that the two forms of sin Dante recognizes in the *Inferno*, "*forza* and *froda*, violence and fraud," become in romance the two primary virtues, and that *froda* often takes the form of disguise.[11] Far from being condemned, it is celebrated. In the Middle English romances it is an expression of agency, and is often a sign that the displaced protagonist is headed back toward identity. Here, then, is the difference that Barnes observes between the Orfeo who enters the court of the fairy king as a poor minstrel and the Orfeo who enters the court at Winchester disguised as a poor minstrel. Orfeo's act of borrowing the beggar's clothes arguably makes no difference in his appearance. The citizens of Winchester see the ragged man whose hair and beard have grown long and unkempt in the wilderness:

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[10] Ganim 38-39.

> "Lo!" þai seyd, "Swiche a man!
> Hou long þe here hongeþ him opan!
> Lo! Hou his berd hongeþ to his kne!
> He is y-clongen al-so a tre!" (505-08)

His personal appearance, quite apart from his clothing, has not changed much since the fairy king's description of him as "lene, rowe & blac" (459). But Orfeo's use of the beggar's clothes does indicate his new ability to manipulate the conditions of his dispossession and exile--in effect, the conditions of his anonymity--so that they become the preconditions for recognition. The strategy underlying the familiar convention of the knight fighting in unmarked or exchanged armour is the same; Jeanne Drewes, in an article on Malory, notes that a romance knight fights anonymously, paradoxically, to raise his own status and thereby to gain further recognition.[12] Disguise, in other words, involves the strategic use of forms of displacement for the purpose of achieving or regaining identity.

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[11] Frye, Scripture 65, 68.

[12] Jeanne Drewes, "The Sense of Hidden Identity in Malory's Morte Darthur," Sir Thomas Malory, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. (New York: AMS, 1992) 17-25.

This conscious and crafty manipulation of circumstances gives the protagonist the unexpected power of secret knowledge, in a kind of metaphysical one-upmanship played against the bewildering world. Fortune has made the king a beggar and is outwitted by the beggar who claims to be the king in disguise. The medieval romances delight in such epistemic mastery, as the episode of Clement and the horned horse in the Southern Octavian demonstrates. Wisdom in romance, Frye notes, "means practical sense, and includes, on the human plane, the ability to get out of a tight spot."[13] In the Middle English romances this wisdom also includes the ability to get into the tight spot, as well as safely out of it, and is called queyntise; it is through queyntise that Clement sneaks into the hostile territory of the sultan's court and safely out again. Queyntise means wisdom, cunning, skill, strategy, ingenuity; as Frye points out, it derives ultimately from the Latin cognitus and therefore indicates knowledge as well as being associated with guile.[14] The Persian knight in Kyng Alisaunder, we recall, is praised for his "grete queyntise." In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain learns that he had been deceived "þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, . . . / And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned, / þe maystrés of Merlyn" (2446-48). The word clusters extraordinarily densely around the horned horse episode in the Southern Octavian. Clement takes Florent to the sultan's daughter "For greet queynteys" (1326) and then asks her for "Som queyntyse" (1329), information to enable him to embarrass her father without damage to his own skin. Upon being told of the wondrous horse, Clement declares that he will steal it "Wyth som queyntys" (1354), and accordingly disguises himself "as palmer quent of ȝyn" (1358), deceiving the sultan with "Queynte lesynges" (1388). Clement the bungler becomes in this episode a practitioner of the craft of deceit, celebrant of the cunning arts, master of secret knowledge.

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[13] Frye, Scripture 69.

[14] Frye, Scripture 74.

Another adept at queyntise, as Bertilak's words in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight indicate, is Merlin. The master magician of Arthurian romance is, writes R. Howard Bloch, "the representation of that which cannot be said and of everything that can be said--a shifter, trickster, joker, arbiter of value and of meaning." He "personifies the figure of the paradox"; "he represents the skilled rhetorician, master of juridical discourse, guardian of technology, and engineer of the physically impossible."[15] In Arthour and Merlin he appears in a bewildering variety of disguises: as a beggar, as various rustics, as a "chapman," as an old man, as a "garsoun," as a knight. In these guises he conveys information and directs the action, a ubiquitous and powerful background presence. To Vter's messengers, sent to search for him, he appears as an old beggar. When they insult him, he scoffs at their ignorance:

> Þe barouns ben witles and wilde
> Þat senten men him seche
> Þat nouȝt no couþe knoweleche,
> Today he haþ ȝou oft mett

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[15] R. Howard Bloch 2.

No knewe ȝe him neuer þe bet. . . . (Auchinleck MS 1944-48)

Knowledge here is a form of recognition; Merlin knows the messengers and their business, but they fail to recognize him. Merlin's knowledge is also power; the messengers cannot find him even when he walks among them, and he reveals himself to whom he chooses, at the times and places of his choice. It is, writes Bloch, "the kind of power afforded by know-how, technical competence, mastery of the signs of a culture."[16] The apparent superfluity of Merlin's disguises points, as does the horned horse episode in Octavian, to an enjoyment of froda, a delight in the craft of manipulation and in the artistry, the queyntise (cognitus, recognition) inherent in the use of knowledge.

Thus Merlin is, as Bloch points out, "an image of the writer . . . and, indeed, an embodiment of the principle of writing itself."[17] In the Middle English romances the artifice of disguise is associated with the artifice of narration, which takes the forms not only of written but also of oral performance, including the performance of music. The horned horse episode in the Southern Octavian reminds us of another quality associated with pilgrims: being well-travelled, they are also rich sources of information and misinformation. Chaucer's pilgrims evidently lived up to expectations; in Piers Plowman, the "Pilgrymes and palmeres" (Prologue 46) that Will sees in the Field of Folk "Wenten forth in hire wey with many wise tales, / And hadden leve to lyen al hire lif after" (Prologue 48-49).[18] As Clement travels around Europe in his palmer's disguise,

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[16] R. Howard Bloch 3.

[17] R. Howard Bloch 2.

> Of oþer palmers he gan frayne
> Lesynges quaynte,
> As ech man behouyd, þat ys yn payne
> Hys tale paynte. (1365-68)

In the sultan's court Clement gives a false account of himself: "For to blere þe soudanes ye / Queynte lesynges he gan to lye" (1387-88). Clement disguised as a palmer is a dealer in tales, "tale" in this case bearing not only its primary meaning of "narrative" but also its connotation of "falsehood" or "fiction." The craft of narrative is therefore itself a manifestation of froda, of queyntise, of manipulative and secret knowledge, of deceit and strategy; the same power that expresses itself in disguise also underlies the artistry of the storyteller.

It is no accident, then, that some romance protagonists who show themselves adept at disguise are also adept at storytelling and music, both forms of queyntise demonstrating the mastery of codes, and both also usually associated with each other. The Middle English Tristrem creates false or alternate identities, including false personal histories, when asked his identity; he is a master of the languages of games and of hunting as well as of music.[19] These discourses--of games, hunting, narrative, music--are cultural codes insofar as they demonstrate familiarity with the culture itself, with the structures of order and meaning that distinguish a culture and its recognition systems from the randomness of non-culture. Orfeo, memorably, is a harper as well as a king. This detail is, of course, continued from the classical story of Orpheus, but it is also strongly developed in the Middle English romance. The opening of Sir Orfeo calls attention to the process of forming a narrative:

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[18] William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 1978). See also V.532-36, XIII.178, and Jusserand 206, quoting William Thorpe: "if these men and women be a month out in their pilgrimage, many of them shall be, a half-year after, great janglers, tale-tellers, and liars."

[19] For similar observations on another version of the Tristan story, see E. D. Blodgett, "Music and Subjectivity in Gottfried's Tristan," Analogon Rationis, ed. Marianne Henn and Christoph Lorey (Edmonton, AB: Marianne Henn and Christoph Lorey, 1994) 1-18.

> When kinges miȝt our y-here
> Of ani meruailes þat þer were,
> Þai token an harp in gle & game
> & maked a lay & ȝaf it name. (17-20)

The story of Orfeo is therefore singularly appropriate, being the story of a harper-king who uses his skill to recover both his wife and his kingdom. The poem is a celebration of the power of this semiotic mastery in several respects. Orfeo's musical ability persuades the fairy king to grant him a request; his disguise, his harping, and his story test the faithfulness of his steward. Finally, the poem declares itself an artifice of the same order, concluding with another reference to the craft of making lays and to the musical art of which Orfeo is the paragon:

> Harpours in Bretaine after þan
> Herd hou þis meruaile bigan,
> & made her-of a lay of gode likeing,
> & nempned it after þe king.
> Þat lay "Orfeo" is y-hote:
> Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note. (597-602)

The act of identifying the lay by naming it, given such prominence at the beginning and end of the poem, links the identity of the lay with the identity of its main character. The skill with which Orfeo finally crafts his own narrative therefore images the skill with which the poet retells that same narrative.

Horn, too, is a harper; in King Horn he learns the craft "of harpe and songe" (244) at Aylmar's court. At the end of the poem he and his men gain access to Fikenhild's castle by disguising themselves as "harpurs, / Fiþeleres and gigours" (1505-06). Like Tristrem's and Orfeo's queyntise, Horn's ability to manipulate semiotic systems to further his own ends extends beyond purely musical skill and includes the ability to play with appearances and the ability to play with words. When Horn, disguised as a palmer, alludes to Rymenhild's dream of fishing and puns on his name, he is, as Ganim suggests, "playing a game with language,"[20] testing its possibilities and powers. His arrival at the castle in disguise, his allusive and elusive conversation with Rymenhild, his revelation of the ring, his fiction of the death of Horn--these details may seem to have some psychological or narrative function, for example of reminding Rymenhild of her previous commitment or of testing her faithfulness, but actually they are as superfluous, or as significant, as Clement's theft of the horned horse in Octavian. They demonstrate Horn's agency, his queyntise, his penchant for double entendre both in appearance and in language, his power of control over circumstances in the face of their threatened control of him. In a world where identity is position in relation to certain social codes, Horn's semiotic mastery indicates his power over his own identity, paradoxically when he seems to have effaced that identity. As Ganim notes, Horn's "wit and intelligence" are preeminently admirable; in his exercise of these qualities Horn represents the author of the romance as he would like to be regarded and the audience of the romance as they would like to be.[21]

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[20] Ganim 38.

Disguise, therefore, is an image of the romance narrative itself. Identity in these texts being positional and largely situated in the recognition structures that underlie human relations in the romances, details of clothing and appearance also represent and constitute identity: the purse and staff of the pilgrim, the rags of the beggar, the heraldic insignia of the knight, the "hosyn and schoon" that mark Egelond's social status in Athelston (583). These material details define identity because they recall conventions and connotations that position characters according to certain assumed classes of humanity: pilgrims, beggars, knights, noblemen. These forms of identity are themselves conventional. The types of people represented in the Middle English romances are of very limited variety and almost always express either a state of identity or a state of displacement. Disguise shows a character's ability to manipulate these conventions rather than to be manipulated by them, whether the conventions are those of appearance, of social identity, or of narrative. This power over cultural codes represented within the narrative by the use of disguise is also represented at a different level by the poet's mastery of the narrative itself.

Thus disguise in the Middle English romances exemplifies the potential of these texts to be simultaneously and paradoxically conservative and subversive. Disguise, like the romance narrative, is conservative insofar as it depends necessarily on given structures of signification and recognition; it is subversive, again like the romance narrative, insofar as it craftily manipulates and reverses the terms of those structures. In these texts kings disguise themselves as beggars and thus regain their kingdoms--not because any beggar has the potential to be king but because the beggar who becomes king is actually already a king in disguise. On the other hand, the ease with which kings become beggars and beggars kings suggests an accessibility to privilege; identity being determined not by any innate virtues but by the coincidence of circumstances, it follows that any beggar can potentially be king. The noble birth of the protagonist is an insistent feature of these thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts--what Ramsey in Chivalric Romances calls "social climbing" in texts such as Bevis of Hampton or Guy of Warwick may not have been perceived by a medieval English audience as terribly revolutionary, since mobility between landowning classes was quite common.[22] Nevertheless, the promotion of Guy from steward's son to Earl of Warwick contains the impetus for the more dramatic movement of the late fifteenth- to early sixteenth-century romance The Squyr of Lowe Degre, in which the squire marries the daughter of the King of Hungary.

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[21] Ganim 40.

Disguise in the Middle English romances is therefore not so much an exploration of appearance versus reality as an exercise of froda, the quality of knowledgeable cunning that, together with the use of force and the coincidences of good fortune, helps the romance protagonist to achieve or recover identity. Ultimately issues of appearance versus reality, as of truth versus falsehood, do not arise with particular urgency in these self-consciously fictional texts. Clement's "queynte lesynges," his representation of himself as Arthur's master of horse, are finally no less artificial than the narrative in which they take place--the object of Clement's deceit is, after all, a marvellous creature apparently fathered by a unicorn. Indeed the primary marker of fictionality is Clement's use of the name of the quintessential monarch of romance, but Arthur is no more fantastic in this world than the Sultan or than Clement himself. The significance of the episode does not lie in the Sultan's failure to see the "real" Paris butcher under the "apparent" palmer, for Clement can be and has been a palmer in earnest. It lies rather in Clement's ability to use, for his own amusement, various systems of signification: the codes of clothing that mark him as a palmer, for example, or the codes of fiction that provide the material for his wild stories. In these romances any character who uses disguise reflects the activity of the poet, not so much in creating a false identity as in demonstrating control over the conditions that make identity possible.

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[22] Postan 158.

Chapter 6

The Man in Red Armour: Recognition

> --Yo sí quién soy--respondió don Quijote--; y sé que puedo ser no sólo los que he dicho, sino todos los doce pares de Francia, y aun todos los nueve de la Fama, pues a todos las hazañas que ellos todos juntos y cada uno por sí hicieron, se aventajáran las mías.
>
> "I know who I am," said Don Quixote, "and who I may be, if I choose: not only those I have mentioned but all the Twelve Peers of France and the Nine Worthies as well; for the exploits of all of them together, or separately, cannot compare with mine."[1]

The loss and recovery of identity lie at the very heart of the early-fourteenth-century romance Sir Perceval of Galles; the poem's young protagonist, cut off from his knightly heritage after his father's death and his mother's self-imposed exile, charges into the world of romance chivalry in enthusiastic ignorance and thereby discovers and recovers his identity as Arthurian knight. After killing the Red Knight, Perceval, having appropriated the Red Knight's armour and horse, responds to a plea for help from the queen of Maidenland. Arthur, having determined Perceval's identity (although Perceval himself is not yet aware of his own identity), rides out with three of his knights to look for his ambitious young nephew. They find Perceval in Maidenland; he has singlehandedly slaughtered the Sultan's entire army, and is riding about in search of the Sultan himself. When Perceval sees Arthur's party, he naturally assumes that they are another installment of Saracens and he prepares to fight them. Arthur and his three knights, seeing a single knight in red armour riding against them, and not wishing to take advantage of the unfair odds, send Gawain out alone to meet the stranger.

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[1] Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha, ed. Florencio Sevilla Arroyo y Antonio Rey Hazas (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 1993) 74. The English translation is from The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York: Modern Library, 1949) 49.

Gawain, riding towards the unknown knight, recognizes the "Horse and hernays" (1435)[2] of the Red Knight and is forced to do some fast thinking. He suspects that his opponent may be Perceval, for he knows that Perceval has killed the Red Knight and taken his armour. Naturally, he does not wish to fight his cousin. On the other hand, he realizes that another knight may have defeated Perceval in turn and taken the horse and armour. Unsure of his opponent's identity, Gawain decides to run a course with the strange knight in the hope that the encounter itself may supply some information. The two knights break their spears on each other,

> And þan bygane Percevale
> For to tell a tale,
> Þat one his tonge laye. (1478-80)

Perceval's comment, characteristically combining astonishment, ignorance, and boastfulness, gives Gawain the clue he needs. He identifies himself and the two stop fighting, but Gawain evidently thinks that Perceval needs more assurance, because he then reminds Perceval that they have met before; in fact, it was Gawain who helped Perceval put on the Red Knight's armour.

> Bot þen was Percevell þe free
> Als blythe, als he myghte be,
> For þen wiste he wele, þat it was he,

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[2] Quotations from Sir Perceval of Galles are from Sir Perceval of Gales, ed. J. Campion and F. Holthausen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1913).

> By takens, þat he tolde. (1517-20)

Thus the two cousins are reunited and reconciled.

This little incident from the only surviving English romance of Perceval illustrates both the mechanisms and the problematics of recognition in the Middle English romances. Recognition is especially important in Sir Perceval of Galles because of the English poet's concentration on a relatively small number of interrelated characters, so that Perceval continually meets other characters he has met before or meets relatives of such characters. The characters he meets also enable him to reconstruct his own heritage; Arthur is both his father's lord and his mother's brother, and in killing the Red Knight Perceval unwittingly revenges his father as well as disposing of the oppressor of his two uncles. Recognition is also closely associated with reconciliation, as the interrupted duel between Perceval and Gawain shows; after the two opponents identify themselves, they put up their visors, kiss, and talk.

Recognition in the Middle English romances implies a supraindividual legitimation of identity. As his "awnn modirs childe" (506) Perceval has no identity, according to the values presupposed by the text. His displaced state is marked not only by his physical removal from the recognition systems of civilization but also by his own inability to identify features of the courtly world; he asks the first knights he meets which one of them is God, he does not recognize Arthur the king when he arrives at the court, and he thinks that all horses are mares. It is Gawain who patiently identifies himself as a knight, identifies Arthur as king, and points out to Perceval that the Red Knight's horse is not a mare; and it is Arthur who tells Perceval the story of Perceval's own parentage.

Even in this romance, in which the protagonist moves from ignorance to knowledge, the process is not one of "dynamic self-realization," to use Hanning's words; Perceval attains an awareness of his identity, certainly, but only because others tell him his own story.

Throughout the Middle English romance corpus, recognition is associated with the reunion or reconcilation of separated friends or family members, and with the restoration of the protagonist's rights to property and to social status. In romances following the pattern of Octavian, in which a separated family is reunited, recognition can be one chance away from tragedy; in Sir Degaré and in Sir Eglamour of Artois, for example, recognition in the nick of time prevents the mother from consummating a marriage with, and the father from killing, their son. In Havelok, where the protagonist knows that he is the rightful king of Denmark but has promised to keep that knowledge secret, the various recognition scenes win him allies who help him and Goldeborw to regain their kingdoms. Again, some recognition systems in Middle English romance are remarkably constant: the kinship system that marks the protagonist's nobility by birth, the socioeconomic structures that define the protagonist's identity in terms of wealth and social standing. In Sir Perceval of Galles identity is explicitly associated with courtly life, which is represented as the preeminent--and only--form of civilization; all recognition systems in the poem are located in the court. The only alternative to courtly life is non-identity.

Two important questions, then, are "As whom is the character recognized?" and "By what means does the recognition take place?" The first is important because names, as markers of identity, represent not so much individuals as their ideal positions in the ideological spaces of the romances. Displacement, therefore, is often accompanied by a loss or change of name; Perceval does not at first know his own name, introducing himself tautologically and unspecifically as his mother's child. Arthur, however, recognizes him as the son of Perceval senior and Acheflour, and that act of recognition confers on Perceval junior both a name (significantly, the same as his father's) and an identity within the context of courtly society: he is now not a nondescript young rustic in goatskins but the son of a notable Arthurian knight and of Arthur's own sister. In Havelok, Goldeborw's recognition of Havelok's identity does not happen until she discovers that Havelok the apparent commoner is in fact Havelok, "kinges sone and kinges eyr" (1268).

D. H. Green, in a study of the Parzival of Wolfram von Eschenbach, suggests four means of recognition in the medieval romances: physical appearance, gestures, "appurtenances," and words.[3] When we observe how these devices are employed in the Middle English romances, some trends become apparent. Recognition of characters by their physical appearance or gestures hardly ever happens in the Middle English romances; identification by means of what Green calls "appurtenances"--clothing, armour, other objects--is much more common. The use of these objects, however, is very problematic, and therefore recognition in the Middle English romances is accomplished most often by verbal acts, and especially by acts of narration.

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[3] D. H. Green, The Art of Recognition in Wolfram's Parzival (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 275.

There are a number of reasons that physical appearance and gesture are so rarely used as a means of recognition in the Middle English romances. On a prosaic level, the conditions under which recognition takes place, or fails to take place, themselves may hinder recognition. Children, for example, are separated from their parents when very young and are not immediately recognized when they appear years later. Armour when it does not bear any identity marker or when it is taken from its original owner is, as our little episode from Sir Perceval of Galles shows, a real barrier to recognition. The English author of Sir Perceval of Galles is acutely conscious of the function of armour as a physical obstacle. After all, Perceval's father dies when his armour fails; later, young Perceval, confounded by the task of unarming the Red Knight, is about to burn the dead man "Out of his iren" (779) when Gawain rides up and shows the inexperienced youth how to unlace armour. Even the detail of Perceval and Gawain putting up their visors to kiss and talk reminds us of the artificiality and awkwardness as well as of the utility of armour--of its function of hiding, even while protecting, the body within.

Even after taking these factors into account, however, we are still left with a number of cases in which a character fails to recognize another even in circumstances where the recognition might reasonably be expected to succeed. There is no indication that Perceval recognizes the lady tied to the tree as the lady with whom he had earlier exchanged rings, until she tells him her story. At the end of Sir Eglamour of Artois, Cristabelle does not recognize her husband even after unarming him and accompanying him to the feast. In King Horn Aþulf's father, even though he professes to be waiting for Horn's return, fails to recognize either Horn or Aþulf when they actually do come back to

Suddene. If the instances of recognition in the Middle English romances are remarkable, the instances of failure of recognition are no less so.

In the Middle English romances, individualizing details of physical appearance are not ordinarily given. The characters in the romances, like the authors of the romances, tend to identify other characters in terms of social contexts or narrative conventions. The equivalent in the Middle English romances of a description of physical appearance tends to be expressed in wholly generic terms, which themselves serve as markers of the _type_ of person a character is. Nobility, for example, is often represented as an innate quality and becomes itself a means of recognition--"nobility" here including all the permutations and connotations of _gentilesse_ or _courtoisie_ in Middle English. Arthur recognizes Perceval because the young man resembles the senior Perceval, Aufreus in _Generides_ recognizes his son because Generides resembles his mother--the implication that nobility is a quality carried in the blood, so to speak, is very strong. In _William of Palerne_ the Emperor of Rome meets the young William in the forest and is struck by his appearance and bearing, immediately suspecting that the child is no ordinary peasant:

> But þanne biheld he aboute and þat barn ofseye,
> hou fair, how fetys it was and freliche schapen;
> so fair a siȝt of seg ne sawe he never are,
> of lere ne of lykame lik him nas none,
> ne of so sad a semblant þat ever he say wiþ eiȝyen.
> Þemperour wend witerly, for wonder of þat child,
> þat feiȝþely it were of feyrye for fairenes þat it welt
> and for þe curteys cuntenaunce þat it kudde þere. (224-31)

As a description of physical appearance, the passage is strikingly abstract; we are told three times that the child is "fair," but we are not told of what "fairenes" consists. The very appearance of the child has social overtones; he is "freliche schapen" and has a "curteys cuntenaunce." The shape and face of the young William relate not to his identity as a physical being, but to his identity as a social being within the ideological structures of the romance.

The most striking instance of the "innate nobility" motif is that, in Havelok, of the extraordinary light that shines from Havelok's mouth when he sleeps--"Al so brith, al so shir, / So it were a blase of fir" (1254-55)--and the "kynemerk" (605) on his right shoulder. It is the "kynemerk," a bright golden cross, that convinces observers that Havelok is the rightful king of Denmark, but the light from his mouth is also a sign of his nobility. Goldeborw, seeing it for the first time, realizes that her husband is no commoner: "He beth heyman yet, als Y wene-- / He beth heyman er he be ded!" (1261-62). Like the physical manifestation of William's nobility, the physical manifestation of Havelok's is described in terms of its effect on others.

This nobility, expressed in the "curteys cuntenaunce" of the young William and in the light that shines from the sleeping Havelok, is, while understood as innate, still understood in terms of identity as position. Rather than being a self-conscious construction, it is a quality of which the characters in question are entirely unconscious. Perceval, Generides, and William are wholly ignorant of their noble parentage; Havelok's illuminatory qualities seem only to manifest themselves when he is sleeping, and he himself seems unaware of either light or birthmark. Furthermore, this distinctive quality of visible nobility distinguishes its bearer not as an individual but as a member of a social group; it marks, we might say again, not person but position. It is because of Perceval's resemblance to a long-dead knight of the Round Table that Arthur even considers the uncouth, skin-clad youth's outrageous request to be knighted. Because of visual signs beyond their conscious control, William and Havelok are identified as incongruous with their circumstances: as "curteys" as opposed to ignoble, "heyman" as opposed to commoner. Finally, these signs of nobility become meaningful only in the act of recognition, only in the act of being properly read. Because the bearers of these signs are themselves unconscious of the signs, their identities are established not so much by their own acts as by the responses of those who recognize those identities. Recognition, therefore, operates in these texts not as a private epiphany but as a social event.

When Havelok begins work as a porter, poor, unknown, and "almest naked" (963), he acquires a reputation for his good qualities:

> Of him ful wide þe word sprong,
> Hw he was mike, hw he was strong,
> Hw fayr man God him hauede maked. . . . (960-62)

In spite of being reduced to the basic level of humanity, perhaps by virtue of that humanity, Havelok still shows dignity and nobility. When he is clothed, however, that nobility takes on sociopolitical overtones:

> Hwan he was cloþed, osed, and shod,
> Was non so fayr under God
> Þat euere yete in erþe were,
> Non þat euere moder bere.
> Jt was neuere man þat yemede
> Jn kinneriche þat so wel semede
> King or cayser for to be,
> Þan he was shod, so semede he. (972-79)

Here is the familiar language of superlatives associated with the protagonist's fitness to become "King or cayser"; Havelok is not only a "fayr man" as "God him hauede maked," but superlatively well-favoured, distinguished explicitly by his superiority to all others, not just a "fayr man" but the fairest under God. It is not the naked Havelok who shows his identity, but Havelok clothed.

Thus what Green calls "appurtenances"--clothing, armour, objects such as cups or rings, even companion animals--take on extraordinary importance in the Middle English romances. The nobility visible in the appearance and bearing of the romance protagonist is often signalled instead by articles of clothing or other objects associated with the protagonist. The young William of Paleme, discovered in the werewolf's den by the cowherd, is

> cloþed ful komly for ani kinges sone,
> in gode cloþes of gold agreþed ful riche,
> wiþ perrey and pellure pertelyche to þe riȝttes. (51-53)

In Sir Eglamour of Artois the King of Israel recognizes that the infant Degrebelle is "comen of gentill blode" (863) because of the rich mantel and golden girdle with which the child is wrapped. The most elaborate instance of this motif occurs, as we have seen, in Emaré. At birth already "þe fayrest creature borne" (50), Emaré has her beauty enhanced by the golden robe; already remarkable for her beauty, she reaches a new level of superlative, so that, while she is wearing the robe, she is repeatedly described as looking like no earthly woman.

"Appurtenances" also include objects used as individualizing signs, or recognition tokens. Unlike the markers of social station, these supposedly distinguish their bearers as individuals. Recognition tokens of this type include heraldic emblems on banners or armour; objects such as Orfeo's harp, the gloves and broken sword in Sir Degaré, or the golden cups in Amis and Amiloun; and the rings given and exchanged in various romances. They range, therefore, from very public symbols, such as armorial bearings, to very private symbols, such as rings. Their operation as signs, in any case, depends on some kind of social or relational context, whether the political relations that unite Arthur's army under the flag of the dragon in Arthour and Merlin or the more private relations that underlie Rymenhild's gift of her ring to Horn. These tokens' status as physical objects, however, has a further consequence. They are detachable; that is, they are not tied to their bearers by any physical necessity. Therefore the use of these objects as recognition tokens is, in the Middle English romances, very often problematic.

Sir Perceval of Galles foregrounds two of these objects: the Red Knight's armour and Acheflour's ring. Armour, or rather clothing, is in this romance emblematic of a character's position relative to the various social spaces in the story. Perceval in the forest, "þe fole one þe filde, / . . . comen oute of þe woddez wilde" (289-90), is dressed in goatskins; the three knights whom he meets are, by contrast, wearing "riche robes" (265). His mother Acheflour tells him that he can recognize a knight by his "menevaire," an item made of squirrel fur and apparently used, in this case, for the lining of a helmet.[4]

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[4] The Middle English Dictionary lists the primary meaning of meniver as "the fur of some kind of squirrel, used in garments, etc., esp. as a trimming." Its secondary meaning of "a helmet liner of meniver" seems applicable only to the two instances in Perceval. In any case, it serves as a marker of knightly status in Perceval because of both its military function (it is part of the knight's armour) and its ornamental function (as "trimming," it implies the culture of civilization, which is concerned not primarily with the basic mechanics of survival but with, among other things, the aesthetics of ornament). J. M. W. Bean in From Lord to Patron (U of

When Perceval first appears before Arthur, the king notes that the young man in goatskins would resemble Perceval sr. if he "were wele dighte" (544, 545). A certain kind of clothing, or rather clothing itself as opposed to the young Perceval's goatskin outfit, marks a character's position within civilization, and specifically within the courtly society envisioned as the ideal form of civilization. When Perceval returns to the forest to look for his mother, who has gone mad and is wandering wild and naked in the woods, he takes off his armour and puts on a goatskin again; when he brings Acheflour back to civilization she is properly clothed and restored to sanity and to identity.

Sir Perceval of Galles also emphasizes, as we have seen, the physicality of clothing and armour, whether in describing the details of Perceval's goatskin outfit --"His hode was juste to his chyn, / Þe flesche-halfe tourned within" (273-74)--or in describing Perceval's ignorance of the intricacies of armour. Thus clothing, and especially armour, is represented not only as a means of recognition--after all, the Red Knight is identified solely by and with the colour of his armour--but also as a physical barrier to recognition. Gawain's predicament, in which he must fight Perceval because he does not know if the stranger in red armour is a friend or an enemy, is very common in the romances. The duel between friends happens also in Sir Degaré, in Sir Eglamour of Artois, in Otuel and Roland, in Richard Coer de Lyon, in Ywain and Gawain, and, most tragically, in Malory's story of Balin and Balan; in many cases the combat takes place because one party is not wearing his usual armour.

Pennsylvania P, 1989) notes that fur trimmings on liveries of the fourteenth century often marked the social station of the wearer (19-20).

This problematic detachability is a feature of other standard recognition tokens, including the ubiquitous rings, of which Acheflour's in Sir Perceval of Galles is an example. When Perceval leaves his mother, she

> gaffe hym a ryng
> And bad, he solde agayne it bryng:
> "Sone, þis sall be oure takynyng,
> For here I sall þe byde." (425-28)

The ring is a token of identity insofar as it signifies the relationship between Perceval and his mother. As a sign, however, it fails conspicuously, for it is twice misread. The Black Knight, seeing it on his lady's hand, reads it as a sign that she has been unfaithful to him; Perceval's mother, offered the ring by Golrotherame's brother, reads it as a sign that Perceval has been killed. In this last instance the ring is still called a "tokynyng" (2151), but its meaning is ambiguous; originally the ring is a token of Acheflour's love for her son, but the giant offers it to Acheflour as a token of his love, a request "Þat scho wolde his leman be" (2146), and she reads it as a token of Perceval's death. Although the sight of the ring reminds Perceval of his mother and motivates him to search for her, the ring itself plays no part in their reunion or in her recognition of Perceval.

Indeed, rings and other recognition tokens are striking not for their success in aiding recognition but for their failure. When Rymenhild in King Horn recognizes the ring that the ragged palmer throws into the cup, she takes it to mean, not that the palmer is Horn, but that Horn is dead--and, as Horn's false story about his death implies, he expects her to misread the sign. In Amis and Amiloun Amis, hearing that a leper outside his gate has a gold cup identical to his own, thrashes the leper for stealing Amiloun's cup before discovering that the unfortunate man is Amiloun himself. In Generides, a text Ramsey calls "almost an encyclopedia of conventional romance motifs,"[5] three rings operate as "tokens," and all of them are problematic. At one point, Clarionas recognizes her ring but not Generides, who is disguised: "On his finger she knew the ring, / Of him had she noo knowleching" (6895-96).[6] At another point, Mirabel urges Clarionas not to read the ring, returned to her by a messenger, as sign of Generides's infidelity; she argues that Generides could easily and unwittingly lose a small object through treason, especially since he once lost "a betre thing" (8486), Clarionas herself. A right reading of the "token," Mirabel says, presupposes Generides's integrity:

> She seid, "trow it neuer I shal--
> For noo token grete ne smal--
> That he wold his trouth breke,
> Til that I here him self speke.
> For the Ring, no more ne les,
> For thurgh treason right wel I gesse;
> The ring I deme right wel he hath lore;
> Fals ye found him neuer before;
> Ma dame, ye shuld not bi right
> Neuer mystrust so gentil a knight
> For loue of a litle ring!" (8475-85)

Again, it is the ring's status as physical object--inarticulate, easily lost, "the Ring, no more ne les"--that problematizes its status as sign.

Thus recognition in the Middle English romances is accomplished most often, and most successfully, not by appurtenances but by verbal acts: not by "tokens" such as rings or other material objects but, as Sir Perceval of Galles puts it, "By takens, þat he tolde" (1520). Mirabel in Generides insists that she will accept as a reliable source of truth not Clarionas's reading of the ring but the verbal testimony of Generides himself. After puns, equivocations, allegories, and intentionally misleading signs, Horn reveals his identity to Rymenhild simply by wiping the dirt off his face and telling Rymenhild who he is:

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[5] Ramsey 187.

[6] Quotations from Generides are from A Royal Historie of the Excellent Knight Generides, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall (Roxburghe Club, 1865; New York: Franklin, 1971).

> Schurte lappe he gan take
> And wipede awey þat blake
> Þat was vpon his swere
> And sede, "Lef so dere,
> Ne canstu me noȝt knowe?
> Ihc am Horn of Westernesse
> In armes þu me kesse." (1229-36)

The steward in Sir Orfeo (with encouragement from Orfeo himself) misreads Orfeo's harp in the hands of a beggar as a sign of his master's death, and recognition occurs only when Orfeo identifies himself. A survey of the Middle English romances will reveal that in most cases recognition is accomplished by the same means: by a verbal act, even when other means of recognition may be involved.

Often the verbal act that accomplishes recognition involves more than a simple statement; again, a name in itself is often significant only insofar as it signifies a position in a given relationship. To Rymenhild, Horn identifies himself not simply as "Horn" or even as "Horn of Westernesse," but as "Horn þinowe. . . . In armes þu me kesse." When Gawain identifies himself to Perceval, after their brief passage of arms, he seems to think it necessary not only to name himself but also to remind Perceval of their previous encounters. Therefore, these verbal acts that accomplish recognition are most often acts of narration. Arthur reveals Perceval's identity to Perceval himself by telling Perceval

Perceval's story, which includes the stories of Perceval sr. and of Acheflour. The conclusion of William of Palerne includes a series of retellings of the interrelated stories of Alphouns and William. The story is retold by the Spanish king, by Alphouns, by the messengers to the emperor, by William and Melior, by the queen of Palerne, and by Partenedon; even the cowherd gives his version. The elaborate and repetitive closing section of William of Palerne seems tedious to a modern reader,[7] but the repeated iterations of the story serve to fix William's identity as meticulously as do the ceremonials that recognize him as king and emperor.

Recognition tokens that operate most successfully in the Middle English romances, then, are those that signify not so much relationships as narratives: the gloves and broken sword in Sir Degaré, the unusual coats of arms in Sir Eglamour of Artois that are emblems of the story of Eglamour's family. Even Arthur's banner of the dragon, in Arthour and Merlin, alludes to the prophetic incident of the two fighting dragons under Fortiger's castle, earlier in the story. The werewolf in William of Palerne becomes an emblem of William's identity, a symbol by which he is recognized, when he takes a werewolf as his arms; but, of course, the value of this heraldic symbol is particularly strong. William is not only identified by the werewolf, but with the werewolf:

> Þe king of Spayne gan crie keneli and schille,
> "War be he þat þe wolf weldes in his scheld,
> þat haþ murþered mi men and swiche harm wrouȝt!
> Miȝt I now have hap him ones to sene,
> I wold him hunte as hard as ever hounde in erthe

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[7] See the editor's comments, Bunt, William of Palerne 110. Bunt notes that the French version of this closing section is even longer than the English.

> honted eny werwolf!" (3831-36)

The werewolf guards and provides for William and Melior during their escape, and the werewolf reminds the queen of Palerne of her lost son. But the werewolf is, even more directly, the carrier of William's identity, for only the werewolf knows that William is the rightful heir to the throne of Palerne; it is therefore necessary to the revelation of William's identity that the werewolf be disenchanted, that his power of speech be restored, so that he can tell his story--his own story and William's.

Certainly, recognition by verbal act is as hazardous an affair as recognition by any other token. Horn and Orfeo provide false narratives, obscuring their identities, before they reveal themselves. Potential narrators, such as the werewolf in William of Palerne, may be silenced. As Edmund Reiss has shown, fourteenth-century writing frequently represents language as fundamentally ambiguous, deceptive, capable of being misread.[8] The beginning of Sir Perceval of Galles is much concerned with the young, uncultured Perceval learning by trial and error the proper names of unfamiliar things; until he learns the proper use of certain verbal signs, he is confused and confusing. For the most part, however, the Middle English romances represent language as reliable, as the recognition token that works when all other tokens fail. Perceval's education in language parallels his education as courtier and man of arms, and his progress in all these areas indicates the eventual mastery of circumstance that the poem celebrates. In the world of the poem all that is anonymous finds a name, all that is scattered is gathered together, all that is lost is found, all that is threatening is conquered, all who are wronged are revenged, all that is wild is brought back to civilization, all that is obscure is finally understood. The Middle English romances, speaking the power of language to create identity, tend to insist upon that power.

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[8] Edmund Reiss, "Ambiguous Signs and Authorial Deceptions in Fourteenth-Century Fictions," Sign, Sentence, Discourse, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989) 113-37.

The encounter between Gawain and Perceval in Sir Perceval of Galles is a form of interrogation, like the chapel scene in Ywain and Gawain. The moments before the encounter, when Gawain sees a suit of red armour riding a red horse towards him and cannot know who his adversary is, illustrate the problematics of recognition in the Middle English romances. Recognition is not usually understood in terms of personal idiosyncrasies but is understood in terms of social codes: symbolic clothing and objects. Identity is represented not as the result of stripping a character of those codes, but as a result of assuming the codes. Acheflour takes her clothes off when she loses her sanity and forgets herself; she returns to sanity and to identity when she is clothed. But the romances, at the same time, hint at a troubling disjunction between identity and identity-token; a ring is recognized but not its bearer, the armour of an enemy hides the face of a friend. Recognition in romance is a hazardous affair, so improbable that, Terence Cave suggests, a recognition scene is in itself a marker of fictionality.[9] The man in the red armour could be anyone; in the romance he turns out to be, coincidentally, the man

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[9] Terence Cave, Recognitions (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 4.

Gawain has been looking for all along. But it is also characteristic of romance that, if recognition had not taken place, Gawain might have killed, or been killed by, his friend.

Gawain recognizes Perceval by Perceval's manner of speech, but Perceval recognizes Gawain when Gawain reminds Perceval of the disarming of the Red Knight--in other words, when Gawain tells Perceval part of Perceval's own story. After the encounter, Gawain leads Perceval to Arthur, who completes Perceval's story for him, allowing Perceval to recognize himself. In the final analysis, identity in these texts is understood in terms of institutions, what I have called "recognition structures," that fix identity according to conventional social relationships. But the most significant recognition structure in these texts is narrative itself. Over and over again, the characters of the Middle English romances tell their own stories and each other's stories, even stories outside of their own narrative: the Middle English romances, like Melidor's chamber in Sir Degrevant, or like Emaré's robe, refer insistently to other texts and especially to other texts of the same genre. Romance figures are their stories; when, for example, a medieval writer refers to the romance of Octavian, it is difficult to tell whether he means the romance of Octavian or a romance of Octavian--nor is the distinction important. By representing identity as a function of narrative, the romance poet draws attention to the artificiality, the self-consciousness, of the romance itself, and implies that narrative, like any other institution, is another means of constructing identity.

Chapter 7

The Knight of the Lion: Implications

> We will never understand anything until we have found some contradictions.[1]

The primary disadvantage of reading a self-realizing subject into the Middle English romances is that such a reading suppresses the complexities of these texts. Presupposing that the ideal Middle English romance is a quest of "self-discovery," where the self to be discovered is the self-contained, always-present humanist subject, not only imposes a simplistic definition of the genre on these poems, but also posits a single standard of judgement, ignoring the various and often contradictory ways in which the romances negotiate their generic conventions. Middle English romance is certainly a highly formulaic genre; its primary narrative pattern--the loss and recovery of identity--and its set of stock characters, episodes, and devices are remarkably consistent throughout the corpus. In spite of this conventionality, however, the Middle English romances display a wide range of variation in structure, style, and ideology. This variation is possible because identity, and the narrative structures that define it, depend ultimately on the recognition systems that underlie each text--the ideological spaces, overt or submerged, in which identity operates. The central question in all the Middle English romances may be "What ertow?" but that question is asked in a multiplicity of contexts and receives a multiplicity of responses.

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[1] Attributed to Niels Bohr.

We have seen, for example, how the encounter between Roland and Otuel in Otuel and Roland both defines and interrogates their identities; the combatants, who share a common code of chivalry, fight on different sides because one is a Christian and the other a Saracen. But the Christianity for which Roland fights is so much a part of the background of the poem that it is almost invisible; we might contrast the related English Charlemagne romance Roland and Vernagu, in which Roland interrrupts his duel with the Saracen Vernagu to deliver a theological lecture. It is perhaps no accident that Vernagu is killed, whereas Otuel is converted; Roland and Vernagu emphasizes the difference between Christian and Saracen, Otuel and Roland their similarity. There is, indeed, no uniform version of Christianity celebrated by all the Middle English romances. Richard Coer de Lyon, Sir Gowther, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Guy of Warwick, and Le Bone Florence of Rome all claim pre-eminent Christian heroism for their protagonists, but there are worlds of difference between the varieties of Christian heroism that they celebrate: the very muscular Christianity of Richard, the dramatic conversion of Gowther, the troubled integrity of Gawain, the more subtle conversion of Guy, the independent dependence of Florence.

We have also seen how Belisant in Otuel and Roland seems to some extent to stand outside of the ideological spaces, the systems of loyalty, that define Roland and Otuel; her presence opens up, however briefly, the possibilities of recognition systems other than those taken for granted by Charlemagne's court. The Middle English romances allow these possibilities of alterity perhaps more often than is usually recognized. In Ywain and Gawain one of the interrogators is the Churl. His meeting with Colgrevance is, at first sight, a meeting of two entirely different worlds; Colgrevance does not even recognize the Churl as human at first. When knight and churl declare their identities to each other, however, we are impelled to guess at the similarities and differences between the representatives of these two worlds. The Churl is not allowed to become too troubling; this first detailed meeting involves the minor character Colgrevance, not Ywain, and the Churl soon drops out of the story. But his existence has the potential to subvert the otherwise self-enclosed, aristocratic world of the romance. The Churl's form of "manhood," consisting of his mastery over wild beasts, is both an analogue of and an alternative to Ywain's "manhood," which consists in large part of his mastery over other men; briefly we catch a glimpse of another ideological space, another recognition system, before returning to the world of Arthurian chivalry.

We should expect, then, similar complexities in the nature of the identities that the romances represent. For example, the friendly lion--a conventional device that appears in Bevis of Hampton, Octavian, Guy of Warwick, and Malory, as well as in Ywain and Gawain--objectifies one aspect of a character's identity, signifying his or her nobility. In Bevis of Hampton, two dangerous lions leave Josian unharmed because they cannot by nature injure "A kynges douȝter, þat maide is, / Kinges douȝter, quene and maide both" (2392-93); in Octavian the lioness cares for the infant Octavian "for it [meaning Octavian] was a kynge sone" (Lincoln MS 349), and, after terrifying a shipload of sailors, meekly follows Florence to Jerusalem. In both cases the lion is a dangerous animal but is exceptionally courteous toward people of royal blood, the kynde of the lion recognizing the kynde of the noble person. In Guy of Warwick, Ywain and Gawain, and Malory's account of Perceval's Grail quest, the emphasis is slightly different. In these cases a knight happens upon a battle between a lion and a dragon or serpent, and makes a choice to aid the lion--because, says Chrétien in Yvain, it is a "gentle and noble beast" ("la beste gentil et franche," 3377), and Perceval in Malory's text similarly recognizes it as "the more naturall beste of the two."[2] The lion's response to the knight is then explained in terms of gratitude rather than recognition, and the knight's action is represented as a choice--in Malory, explicitly a theological choice--between two natures. In Guy of Warwick, Chrétien, and Malory, it is the knight who recognizes and chooses the nobility of the lion, rather than the lion that recognizes the nobility of the knight. The difference in emphasis between the lions of Bevis and Octavian and the lions of Ywain and Malory demonstrates that identity can be represented as an internal quality, attached to the character in question and recognized even by wild beasts, or as an external quality, symbolized by the lion, with which the protagonist may choose to associate himself.

The Middle English romances thus imply that identity must be both recognized and asserted, that it is both inherent and acquired. The king-light that issues from Havelok's mouth signifies his nobility in spite of his poverty and anonymity; it can operate as a sign, however, only if it is correctly read by others, and Havelok himself must take action to regain his kingdom. On the one hand, nobility and virtue are represented as essential attributes: Florent, fostered by a commoner in Octavian, and Perceval, growing up in the woods in Sir Perceval of Galles, take instinctively to the chivalric life; the young hero of William of Palerne looks noble in spite of his common upbringing. On the other hand, nobility and virtue are represented as qualities to be enacted: Florent, Perceval, and William must, by courtly conduct and force of arms, prove their superiority over others. The apparent paradox is easier to handle if we think of identity, not as a quality that a character must have, but as a transaction between the individual and an array of recognition systems. On the one hand, only Havelok carries the sign of his kingship; on the other, the sign means nothing unless Havelok can prove his fitness to be king by his subsequent accomplishments. The tenuousness of the relationship between the individual and the recognition systems that define that individual's identity indicates the instability of identity itself. Identity may be represented as a position of ideal autonomy and stability, but there is nothing assured about that position.

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[2] Thomas Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 3rd ed. by P. J. C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 2: 912.

These tensions in the heart of romance explain in part why romance has been regarded both as essentially conservative and as essentially subversive.[3] Its structures tend to defend the status quo. The propriety of fighting for king and faith is taken for granted; the man made king at the end of the story is the man who was supposed to be king in the first place; even when the romance protagonist raises his or her status, he or she does it according to the terms of the accepted social structures. Guy the steward's son may have become earl of Warwick, but the romance hardly implies that all stewards' sons should have the same rights and privileges as earls; Guy moves into a different social category, but the categories themselves are not overtly questioned. On the other hand, an undercurrent of questioning does run through these texts; the ease by which identity is lost, the use of disguise to foreground and subvert recognition systems, and the haphazard nature of recognition all hint that identity is not as self-evident as the structures of power might wish.

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[3] See, for example, Frye, Scripture, especially the last chapter.

The narratives that contain these tensions include themselves among the recognition systems that they both assert and question. As I have argued, one of the most powerful recognition systems invoked in these texts is that of narrative itself, specifically the structures and conventions of medieval romance. In Ywain and Gawain, Ywain's reply to the question "What ertow?" is conventional, if cryptic. "I was a man, now am I nane" (2116) introduces a story about the reversal of fortunes; Ywain's loss of his property, of his command over others, and of his lady is represented as the loss of his manhood and therefore, by extension, as the loss of his identity. Ywain has moved, as a medieval English writer might say, from "boote" to "bale." Ywain understands himself not only as a specific type of person but also as a person in a specific type of story.

A central concern of Ywain and Gawain is the truth of words. The introduction to the English romance contrasts Arthur's ideal kingdom and the treacherous world in which the text is located, emphasizing "trowth," especially "trowth" in speech, in a way that Chrétien's poem does not.[4] In Arthur's time, says the English author,

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[4] See Tony Hunt, "Beginnings, Middles, and Ends: Some Interpretive Problems in Chrétien's Yvain and its Medieval Adaptations," The Craft of Fiction, ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, MI: Solaris, 1984) 83-117, and Barnes 33-41.

> Þai tald of more trewth þam bitwene
> Þan now omang men here es sene,
> For trowth and luf es al bylaft;
> Men uses now anoþer craft.
> With worde men makes it trew and stabil,
> Bot in þaire faith es noght bot fabil;
> With þe mowth men makes it hale,
> Bit trew trowth es nane in þe tale. (33-40)

Although the introduction asserts the exemplary "trowth" of the Arthurian social order, the story that follows is much more ambiguous. Ywain's loss, after all, is the result of his lack of "trowth," of his failure to keep an oath to his lady; he becomes a "Traytur untrew and trowthles" (1626). He has betrayed not only Alundyne but also his own identity: "It es ful mekyl ogains þe right / To cal so fals a man a knight" (1611-12). In his grief Ywain suffers a further loss of identity; he goes mad and runs off to the woods, to live as a wild man until a passing maiden recognizes him and cures his madness. Even after his cure he preserves his anonymity, preferring to call himself "The Knight of the Lion." We may consider this alias a disguise, but it is a rather complicated disguise. First, it is, like many other disguises in the romances, an expression of displacement; Ywain is the Knight of the Lion because he is no longer the Knight of the Fountain. Second, the disguise becomes itself a form of identity; Ywain becomes _recognized_ as the Knight of the Lion. The original title of Chrétien's romance, on which the Middle English poem is based, is _Le Chevalier au Lion_; Lunet, recognizing Ywain, "knew him wele by his lioun" (3929). When the inhabitants of a certain castle refuse entry to Ywain unless he leaves his lion outside, he protests:

> Mi lyoun and I sal noght twyn;
> I luf him als wele, I ȝow hete,

> As my self at ane mete. (2220-22)

The lion is an emblem of Ywain's nobility. Certainly the inhabitants of the same castle "read" the lion in this way: "Þai said, 'He es of grete renowne, / For with hym dwels þe lyoun'" (2339-40).

Ywain's identity as Knight of the Lion plays a crucial role in the recovery of his identity as Knight of the Fountain. Lunet's strategem for reinstating Ywain involves playing with the systems of signification that constitute identity; she tells Alundyne Ywain's story, without telling her that the Knight of the Lion is Ywain. Thus the recognition scene that restores Ywain to his identity depends, paradoxically, on both the failure and the success of recognition; only by failing to recognize the Knight of the Lion as Ywain does Alundyne agree, in effect, to recognize Ywain as Knight of the Fountain once again. Thus the recognition scene depends both on the treachery and the truth of words. Lunet in "desait" (3873) tells a true story that she intends Alundyne to misread. When Alundyne discovers the ruse, she is momentarily furious, but her insistence on keeping her own oath--"Þat I have said, I sal fulfill" (3992)--overturns the effects of Ywain's broken promise. In reasserting the validity of the acts of language that establish human relationships, Alundyne restores Ywain's identity:

> Þus þe knyght with þe liown
> Es turned now to Syr Ywayn
> And has his lordship al ogayn. (4020-22)

The paradoxical recognition scene that ends Ywain and Gawain is emblematic of a paradox that underlies all of the Middle English romance: being so insistently concerned with the possibilities of recognition, basing that recognition ultimately on verbal acts, these texts both assert and question the reliability of signification. Terence Cave has remarked that

> . . . recognition scenes in literary works are by their nature "problem" moments rather than moments of satisfaction and completion. Anagnorisis seems at first sight to be a paradigm of narrative satisfaction: it answers questions, restores identity and symmetry, and makes a whole hidden structure of relations intelligible. Yet the satisfaction is also somehow excessive, the reassurance too easy; the structure is visibly prone to collapse.[5]

When recognition depends on detachable and ambiguous signs, it becomes necessarily problematic, and we have seen that the Middle English romances consistently represent recognition as ultimately dependent not on recognition tokens such as clothing or rings, but rather, as in Sir Perceval of Galles, on "takens, þat he tolde" (1520)--in other words, not on physical but on verbal signs. But verbal signs are themselves detachable and ambiguous. Clement in the Southern Octavian deceives the sultan with "Queynte lesynges" (1388); indeed, disguise often involves the use of false verbal signs. Susan Crane's fine reading of Athelston shows that the problematics of language, far from being confined to isolated episodes, can become a central concern of an entire text. The action of Athelston is judicial and, therefore, fundamentally verbal; a surprisingly prominent figure in the poem is Athelston the messenger, who, Crane notes, enacts "the unreliability of language"--an unreliability that ultimately threatens the possibility of justice.[6] Although Crane suggests that Athelston is atypical among Middle English romances in its emphasis on the fallibility of language, I suspect that texts so preoccupied with verbal action, so insistent on their own status as verbal acts, do not subscribe easily to a doctrine of the Infallible Word. The Middle English romances, even as they assert the power of language to create identity, indicate just as strongly the power of language to misrepresent identity and the propensity of language to fail and to disintegrate.

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[5] Cave 489.

[6] Crane 71-73.

What, then, do representations of identity in the Middle English romances tell us about medieval models of subjectivity? In one sense, their information is of limited value. The subjectivity represented in the Middle English romances is a literary convention, a technique of comprehension, and for that reason it would be presumptuous to assume that the representation of identity in the Middle English romances is an uncomplicated image of the ways in which medieval people understood themselves. But the romances are, nevertheless, relevant to an understanding of the people who produced and read them--not because these texts represent completely the lives of medieval people, but because the romances provided a system of images and values by which medieval people could interpret themselves. Medieval genres that we might classify as "historical" narrative, such as chronicle or biography, often use the language and narrative conventions of romance; Sumner Ferris notes that the Chandos Herald's Life of the Black Prince "focusses on the person as knight, not on the knight as person."[7]

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[7] Sumner Ferris, "Chronicle, Chivalric Biography, and Family Tradition in Fourteenth-Century England," Chivalric Literature, ed. Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980) 35. For a fifteenth-century example of life imitating art, see Jennifer R. Goodman, "Display, Self-Definition, and the Frontiers of Romance in the 1463 Bruges Pas du perron fée," Trexler 47-54.

One excellent example of the translation of romance into history is provided by the Beauchamp family, earls of Warwick, who seem to have consistently and consciously appropriated the Guy of Warwick legend to reinforce their own identity. In 1271 William Beauchamp named his son Guy; William's grandson Thomas named his three eldest sons Guy, Thomas, and Reynbron. A list of books given to Bordesley Abbey in 1305 by Earl Guy includes a "Romance of Guy," whether an Anglo-Norman or a Middle English version is unknown. An early-fourteenth-century drinking bowl shows a knight in the Beauchamp arms killing a dragon in the presence of a lion. John Lydgate wrote for Margaret Talbot, Richard Beauchamp's daughter, a version of Guy; the prologue surviving in two of the six manuscripts claims that the subject of the poem is "the lyf of þat moste worthy knyght Guy of warwike of whos bloode shee is lyneally descendid." In the late fifteenth century John Rous, a priest associated with the Beauchamps, was commissioned to produce the Rous Roll, which names Rohaud Earl of Warwick, Felice, "Sir Gy of Warrwyk," and Reynbron as Beauchamp ancestors.[8] Although there is no evidence for a single historical figure corresponding to the legendary Guy of Warwick, the appropriation of the legend as family history provided the historical earls of Warwick with an illustrious ancestry that both validated their status and idealized their aspirations.

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[8] Fewster 106-21; see also Richmond, Legend, for adaptations and appropriations of the Guy of Warwick legend. Emma Mason, "Legends of the Beauchamps' Ancestors: The Use of Baronial Propaganda in Medieval England," Journal of Medieval History 10 (1984): 25-40, discusses in detail the roles of Guy of Warwick and of the Rous Roll in consolidating the political identity of the Beauchamps.

Frank Kermode has suggested a distinction between fictions in which narrative generates character and fictions in which character generates narrative;[9] Frye makes essentially the same distinction between the romance and the novel.[10] Obviously, the Middle English verse romances belong to the first category. Less obviously, however, they hint at the second alternative, precisely because they are narratives of identity in which identity itself is often established through narrative. The verbal signs that trigger recognition are often narratives. Ywain and Lunet, in the context of their mutual interrogation in the chapel, construct their answers as narratives, using familiar romance topoi: the greatest misfortune, the catastrophe of displacement, the loss of property, the betrayal of love, the false accusation. In this conversation with Lunet, Ywain does not disclose the reason for his loss, which is his own unfaithfulness; in his final reconciliation with Alundyne, however, he recasts his story specifically in terms of his own guilt, and is then forgiven. On a more elaborate scale, the stories of the principal characters in Sir Degaré, told at the critical moment, play a crucial role in averting disaster; the stories represented on the shields in Sir Eglamour of Artois provide the context for recognition and reunion; and the narratives-within-the-narrative at the end of William of Palerne hint at the importance of narrative in legitimating identity in a public context. Also significantly, the protagonists of the Middle English verse romances are often storytellers, using true and false stories, respectively, to reveal and to conceal their identities. Identity in these texts is a function of narrative, to be sure, but the texts also represent their characters producing narratives of their own in order to establish their identities.

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[9] Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979) 75-78.

[10] Frye, Anatomy 304-05.

Thus, as in Ywain and Gawain, the Middle English romances themselves depend on what I have called the treachery and the truth of words. Self-consciously fictional, preferring to depend on their own romance tradition than on history for their materials, the romances construct idealized identities that neither author nor audience could have hoped to attain. But the very act of narrative is itself a recognition system, articulating assumptions about what it means to Be Someone in specific historical and social contexts. The romances, in other words, are involved not only in representing but also in creating and defining identities. The poet locates Ywain and Gawain in a world of uncertainties and falsehood, a world in which "trowth and luf es al bylaft." In protest against an unreliable "now," the poet aligns his text with the ideal world of Arthurian romance, an alternative world that sustains itself, rather self-referentially, by the telling of romances:

> Fast þai carped and curtaysly
> Of dedes of armes and of veneri
> And of gude knightes þat lyfed þen,
> And how men might þam kyndeli ken
> By doghtines of þaire gude ded
> On ilka syde, wharesum þai ȝede;
> For þai war stif in ilka stowre,
> And þarfore gat þai grete honowre. (25-32)

Trapped in the unfortunate world of "now," where faith "es noght bot fabil," the poet turns to fable in order to find faith.

The Middle English verse romances are worth further study, I believe, for a number of reasons. The first is that they have been relatively neglected; Ker's distinction between the "weight and solidity" of Epic and the "mystery and fantasy" (and, by implication, the frivolity) of Romance has haunted scholarship, as we have seen, for the last hundred years. Frye, in his account of the relations between romance and other modes of literature in The Secular Scripture, notes a tendency for romance texts to be pushed under canonical texts, to be consistently marginalized, suppressed, and labelled subversive, escapist, inferior, unsophisticated, and wasteful. Defenders of romance have found a cause in the claim that the romances promoted the cause of individual autonomy, but, as we have seen, such a claim is problematic at best. In a critical climate that declares us free from "the ideology of the subject," the Middle English romances are receiving somewhat better press, although slight in comparison to the vast apparatus of Chaucer scholarship that is still being produced. The only Middle English romance text to receive even comparable treatment is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; its scarred (and therefore flawed) knight has been an appealing subject for critics looking for a humanistic representation of character, while its complexities, its very indeterminacy, appeals to postmodern susceptibilities. But if we see the Middle English romances, even such unremarkable texts as Otuel and Roland or Octavian, as interrogations of identity, we can open them up to the exploration of specific identities and of the ideological structures that define those identities.

It is obvious that I have not been able, within the scope of this study, to explore to any great depth any of the recognition systems to which I have alluded, nor have I been able to examine closely any of the culturally, historically, and socially bounded identities that those recognition systems imply. The social and cultural categories that form recognition systems--categories of gender, race, social station, political position, or religion, to cite a few examples--need further study, especially of the ways in which these categories affect representations of identity in these romances. In offering an approach to the Middle English romances in terms of identity, and especially in defining identity as position within an array of recognition systems, I hope to have hinted at ways of opening up some neglected texts not only to closer and more careful reading but also to explorations of the historical and cultural contexts in which those texts were involved.

Finally, the concerns and issues raised in this study obviously extend beyond the Middle English romances into postmedieval genres: Elizabethan romance, the Victorian novel, Gothic romance, detective fiction, twentieth-century speculative fiction. The epigraphs attached to the chapters in this study also demonstrate the scope of these concerns, hinting at a preoccupation with matters of identity that extends beyond the English literary tradition and, indeed, beyond literature itself: Lewis Carroll's metaphysical fantasy; Ibsen's drama of a man in search of his Self; neurologist Oliver Sacks's account of the "confabulatory delirium" of a patient with Korsakov's amnesia; Julia Kristeva's study of abjection; Oscar Wilde's irreverent defence of the priority of art over life; Cervantes's celebration/condemnation of medieval romance; physicist Niels Bohr's exposition of his "principle of complementarity."

This study has, I hope, demonstrated that the Middle English romances, in spite of and even by virtue of their conventionality, can hold complexities of their own. The key to such this approach has been to read the romances primarily as narratives representing identity, and to see that identity as being interrogated and recognized by the institutional context of a character's words and actions. When we read the choices in these texts as being not primarily the choices of characters on a mission of "self-realization" but, rather, the choices of a poet creating and resolving tensions through a judicious use of narrative conventions, the romances can be read not as if they were frustrated novels but, instead, as texts demonstrating a necessary awareness of their own literary and cultural contexts. Nor does such a reading preclude the accessibility of the romances, for a basic premise of that awareness is the recognition that narrative itself is one of the institutions by which we interrogate and fabricate and define identity. The ultimate act of recognition that the romance generates is the recognition that the romance narrative potentially participates in the identity of the reader.

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